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AS I DIE LYING

by  
Neil Wood

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2009

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**Canada**

AS I DIE LYING

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### **Abstract**

This thesis contains creative redactions from selected works drawn from the Twentieth Century American canon. The works were written by Langston Hughes, Joyce Carol Oates, Ernest Hemingway, J.D. Salinger and John Updike. This these creatively examines the criteria and identity politics surrounding canonical inclusion.

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HUGHES

I walk out the door and see Melon sitting at the picnic table. I walk over and sit down across from him, "Hey Melon."

"Hello."

"I heard about your aunt."

"Great aunt and what did you hear?"

"Your great aunt. I heard from the Chaplin that she just passed ten minutes ago."

"You heard right."

"You taking the rest of the night off then?"

"Maybe. My fam's on their way right now. I think I might wait for them."

I nod, "Was she your mom's aunt or your dad's?"

"Mom's."

"How's your mom doing?"

"She's a wreck. She'll probably get another tattoo."

"How many is she up to?"

"Twelve."

I take off gloves and lay them out on the picnic table. I discreetly peek down at my watch. Mr. Lacuzo's laundry, that I left spinning in the dryer, is never far from my mind.

"Jesus, twelve?"

"Yup."

"Is she a biker chick?"



“No.”

“Tough?”

“Not overly.”

“You know it’s weird,” I say taking my smokes from my pocket. I offer the pack to him and try to think of a way to distract my friend, “Whenever I see a chick with a ton of tats, I can’t help but think she’s tough as hell.”

“I don’t know what to look for anymore,” says Melon as he accepts and leans forward as I hold out my light for him, “I can’t tell anything about no one no more so I stopped trying. You can’t look at someone’s shoes and tell me how hard or how easy they’ve had things. You can’t look at their clothes and tell me if they’re rich or poor. You can’t look at their tattoos and tell me anything of value about them. Look at my clothes, my shoes and tell me what you know about me.”

“I know you’re a nurse,” I answer and nod towards the pack. He nods back. I take one out and light it.

“Yeah but that’s it?” asks Melon, “That’s all you can tell about me? Can’t you tell anything else just by looking at me? Do I like French women? Do I like rock? Rap? Can you tell anything *real* about me? The shit I’ve been through and the shit I’ve seen? What am I like right before I go to sleep? When no one else is around, what am I really like? What’s my life like? What’s my past like? Did I ever break a heart?”

“Listen man, I’m not much of a psychic and I don’t know shit about past lives. The types of things you’re talking about you never really know about another person

unless, I mean, you actually know the person. And I like you but honestly, I don't even know where you were born, let alone half the things you're talking about."

"February 29th 1972, my mother was rushed from a James Brown concert to a hospital where she gave birth to me."

"Really? That's kind of cool."

"What's that?" Melon ashes into the dented and rusted coffee can.

"It's cool that you were born on a leap year while being rushed from a James Brown concert. It's also cool that you're technically only nine years old."

"It's not cool."

"What is it then?"

"Ironic," says Melom "Figures I would be born at a James Brown concert. Since that day, I have never felt good and I know that I won't."

"Listen, it just sounds like you need some time off."

"I don't need any time off," says Melon. "But you're not the only person to tell me that. My family tells me I work too hard but it's a man's business if he works too hard. Anyway, I don't like having time off. I feel lazy. I've always worked. Ever since I was a little kid, I have always had a job."

"Really?"

"Yeah. When I just seven years old," says Melon, "I got a paper route. Not a paper route. A Pennysaver route. My mom said that I would have to work. I would have to contribute to the family. She said that she couldn't be going around paying for everything

for me so I got this job. Every Sunday, these huge bundles of paper, coupons and whatever else would show up in front of our apartment door. They paid by the amount of paper and each paper was like a fraction of a cent so the more inserts, the more money you'd make. I would lug them up three flights of stairs, stuff them in my room and deliver them around the neighbourhood all by myself. I think the most I ever made was like twenty bucks on one pay and I won a CD. It was a mix CD, you know a compilation with C&C Music Factory, New Kids, Marky Mark. You know those guys?"

I shake my head, "My earliest musical memory was Pearl Jam."

"Really?"

"Yup."

"Well, it wasn't much at all but at least it was something. And after the paper route, I just kept right on working. I never stopped. I worked at my uncle's glass shop. You know that tornado proof house out in the Glade? I helped build that when I was twelve years old. They let me shoot the nails into the glass. Well plexiglass. At least six inches thick. Seriously. I was twelve and working on a construction site. After that I got a job at a movie theatre. I was in highschool but during that same year, I got another job unloading trucks from UPS. I worked as a waiter and bartender through college and now I'm here. I had nothing resembling a childhood which is why I said it was ironic that my mom went into labour at a James Brown concert because I've never felt good. You know all those normal kid things you all did? Play soccer after school? Sleep out in a tent in the summer? Camping? I never did any of those things."

“You need a bad habit. Start drinking. Drugs. Palm your patient’s meds. Do something.”

“Well, I just started smoking again,” smiles Melon holding up the cigarette.

“How long’s it been?”

“Three years.”

“And? How is it?”

“Magical. DNA-altering.”

“Why did you ever quit?”

“I quit when I moved back home. My mom had just quit and by the time she started again, I had lost all taste for it.”

“You still look like a nurse” I say, “but you do not look like your life. You are not an open book. We’ve been friends for what? Six months? And I feel like I know nothing about you.”

“You have ears but are you deaf?” asks Melon, “You don’t know anything about me because there is nothing to know. Did you not just listen to what I said? I have not had a life. I’ve just worked. That’s it. That’s my entire life. I have been everything. Done everything. I’ve been a garbage man, a cook, a sous chef, a customs officer, a street sweep, a fisherman, a sailor. I was even an actor at one of those historical villages. I’ve never had a girlfriend. I’ve never gone camping. The only thing I’ll have to show the Lord on Judgement are the bunions on my feet from working like a sucker my entire life. I’ve already written my memoir. It’s my resume.”

“Come on,” I say, “You’re kidding. Everyone lives a life. I know you’ve gone out. I was there. I know you’ve been happy. I’ve seen you smile. You’ve never had a life? Come on. Get off it. Man. I know you have. You just said that you were twelve years old the first time you worked at a construction site. Do you have any idea how fucking cool that is?”

“Look up,” Melon points up to the third floor, “You see that window? In that window is the body of my great aunt. I should be up there grieving. I should be up there waiting for my family but you want to know what I’m actually thinking? I’m thinking, no hoping, that her funeral doesn’t interfere with my work. Work is all I have. My mom’s family doesn’t trust me because of my father. I don’t know anything about my father’s family except that they’re Lebanese and living somewhere in Lebanon. That’s my life up there and I’m down here. The things that are most important to people are up in that room and I’m down here talking to the guy who washes old people’s fucking underwear and cardigan sweaters.”

“Hey now,” I say, “I thought we were friends. There’s more to life than just work.”

“There is?” asks Melon, “Really? You should’ve told my Great Aunt McKanen that when she was alive. She would’ve laughed at you. She lived through the war when all there were working people. There is nothing more than work. That’s all we are and that’s all we can ever hope to be. There are a few people who are privileged enough, rich enough to be something other than what they are if only for a few hours. They can afford

the price of that dream but the rest of us, don't fucking kid yourself. You're just a dishwasher. I'm just a nurse. You will always be a dishwasher and I will always be a nurse. We are what we do."

"Well, you're not working now, right" I say, "What are you now?"

"I'm on break," says Melon as he flicks his cigarette away.

Just then, a beat up car enters the lots and parks in the spot closest to the rest home. Melon's mom, a large woman with dyed blonde hair and several tattoos exits the car. She doesn't notice her son but walks straight for the entrance. Melon's hand, which had shut up in a greeting, slowly floats down.

"I gotta go," he says, "Can I get a couple smokes?"

I just give him the rest of my pack, with half a dozen smokes left. "Here," I say, "Take it. Enjoy it. On one condition. That you take a couple days off work."

"Nevermind. I'll buy a pack on my way home tonight." says Mel as he gets up and follows his mother up the stairs to a darkened room where the body of a woman lies alone.

## HEMINGWAY

Late morning and the funeral director stamps purple magnetic flags on the hoods and roofs of vehicles. The first to get a flag is a black hearse with chrome detailing in which lies a white coffin holding the body of a woman whose ring finger is naked for the first time in forty years. The next two vehicles to get flags are a pair of black limousines which hold her four sons, her only daughter and her grandchildren ranging in age from oblivious to confused to pissed off. Her quiet widow-humped husband, whose hands tremble as they hold the diamond ring that he sold his first car to buy, is in one of the limousines as well. Two pallbearers, nephews of the dead, sit in a truck and watch an almost middle-aged man wander through the convoy, his tanned skin sporadically sallow in the off-kilter blinking of various hazard lights. They barely recognize him being that they were little more than boys when they saw him last. However, rumours whispered around the barbeque at family reunions had filled their heads with half stories and clues about what could never formally be spoken of. They know by looking at him that he has gotten sloppy and fat with age and that they could probably take him but now is neither the time nor the place unless now is the time and the place but that depends entirely upon this almost middle aged man's behaviour which the two cousins watch intently.

"I heard he tried to cut out little Ryan," the driver says.

"Why?"

"Thought he was an alien."

"What kind?"

“I didn’t know there were different kinds.”

“Sure. Illegal aliens, space aliens... yadda-yadda-yadda...”

“I’m sure he took a knife to his pregnant wife’s belly to cut out a baby he thought was a Mexican. A space alien, numb-nuts.”

“Oh. That’s weird.”

“Exactly.”

The two pallbearers sit quietly together, reclining slightly in leather bucket seats, smoking and passing a flask back and forth very careful not to spill. The flask is silver and was the gift the passenger gave to all the groomsmen in his recent wedding. Today it’s filled with brandy, cheap brandy, but brandy nonetheless. The two cousins watch the almost middle-aged man, fat with age, continue to weave in and out of the stalled processional line knocking on windows and talking briefly to people. Some smile politely while others only roll their windows down a crack but everyone shakes their heads. Late summer leaves flicker green and blue in the slight wind. The driver moves to unbuckle his seat belt. The passenger stops him, “The funeral director will send him home.”

“She better. Thanks.” He accepts the flasks and takes a long haul. “Did you see her?”

“I did.”

“She’s hot, don’t you think? She’s got that whole pent-up repressed freak-on-a-leash thing happening. I bet beneath her whole business suit she’s rocking a leather corset. Tell me you wouldn’t fuck her, and I’ll call you a liar.”



“I wouldn’t fuck her.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying. I’m married.”

“So? Who cares? You’re married. What’s the problem? Too committed? Is that it?”

“Yes. I am committed to my wife. Believe it or not, I don’t want to cheat on her. I don’t see the appeal. God gave me a wonderful woman to be my wife, and I think...”

“Listen, I know you got religion somewhere along the line and that’s cool. I’m not judging. All I’m saying is find out where Jesus put your balls and get them back.”

“Anyway, the point is even if I weren’t married, I still don’t think I could fuck her. Do you have any idea how many dead bodies she touches in a week? I don’t think I could handle it.”

“Yeah, you could. I could.” There’s a knock on the window. The driver rolls it down. “Hey.”

“Hey, how’s it going? Wow. Last time I saw you guys you were just getting into skateboards and now you’re driving? Damn. And you, you’re married, man. Wow. Hey, why wasn’t I invited? Jus-just kidding. I haven’t seen you guys in, in a long time. Nice, nice, truck.”

The driver props his arm on the window, “Do you need something?”

“Well, yeah. Do either of you know what cars my kids are in?”

“Can’t say that I do,” lies the driver.

The passenger avoids technically lying by smiling a sorry-about-your-luck-smile which could be interpreted as a I-have-no-clue-where-your-kids-are-smile even though he knows full well that they're in one of the limousines surrounded by their aunts and uncles.

"Okay, well, okay. We'll see you later, okay? Hey," he puts his hand on the window, "Sorry but do you think I could get a ride out to the cemetery with you?"

"No. Not from me. Get your hands off my window."

Refusing to look the driver in the eye, scanning the sky he asks quietly, "Please."

"No," the driver says and rolls the window up the last inch. The almost middle-aged man stares into the window and then walks away. The passenger looks at the driver, takes the flask from him, shakes his head and knocks back a shot. "Don't look at me like that. He's not even supposed to be here. Sweet zombie Jesus, I'm tired. I haven't been sleeping all too well these past couple months. You ever get like that? It's like there's this feeling in my chest. I'm scared everything is just one moment away from going to shit and I don't know why. I feel like I could pass out for days and not wake up. I need a vacation. Bahamas, Australia, Euro railing, Amsterdam... just something... what about Vegas? You wanna come with me? We can get some weed, some coke, a shit load of booze. Hit the tables, go to a couple titty-clubs, maybe a rub-and-tug and finish off with Cirque du Soleil. Come on. It'll be great. You don't even have to pay. My treat."

"Listen, I can't just pack up and go on lost weekends with you anymore man. I'm married now."

“Yeah... yadda-yadda-yadda...” The driver is about to start into a bachelor’s tirade against domestication and emasculation when the almost middle-aged man, sloppy and fat with age, whom they could take any time, re-appears at the window and taps on it with the tip of his key. The driver rolls down his window, “Taking a fucking hint. You shouldn’t have come here. You’re not welcome and you’re not getting a ride so fuck off.”

The almost middle aged man puts his hands together. “Please. No one will give me a ride.” The driver pops open the door and steps out. “Please,” the almost middle-aged man pleads sinking away like a dog who has just been cracked on the ass for eating its own vomit. The driver sits back down in his seat, slams the door shut and looks over at his cousin who shrugs.

“Come on, what’s the harm in giving him a ride? I heard that he’s better now anyway,” the passenger says.

“I hear that he thinks he’s better and that’s what he tells everyone. But I also heard that he tried to commit suicide a couple months ago.”

“Why did he want to kill himself for?”

“How should I know? Messages from space, secret government plots, Illuminati... yadda-yadda-yadda...”

“How did he do it?”

“Tried slitting his wrists.”

“Who found him?”

“Social worker. The dumb shit tried using a woman’s disposable razor. Barely broke the skin. I tell you what though. I wish he would’ve succeeded.”

“That’s an awful thing to say.”

“It’s true.”

“Does he pay child support now?”

“Not that I know of.”

“He looks awful.”

“I just wish he would go home. His ex-wife doesn’t want him here. She told me that much. And I know that Aunt Iris wouldn’t have wanted him at her funeral. She hated him from the beginning. Dumped tea on him that one Thanksgiving. Remember that?”

“Of course I remember. It was at my house. My mom was ready to spit bees she was so pissed. Ruined an antique sofa, stained the carpet, yadda-yadda-yadda... anyway, that’s in the past. Maybe he’s just trying to be more supportive. You know, be there for his kids. That’s not a bad thing. I think this is the first person they know that has died.”

“Well they’ve got people. They’ve got us. They don’t need him.”

“He’s their dad. Anyway, I hear he’s in a home now.”

“I heard that too. I’ve even seen it. It’s a half-way house on Hespeler for people too crazy for jail but not enough off their rocker for St. Thomas.”

“So he is sick?”

“Was there ever any doubt? Of course he’s sick. I just don’t care.”

The procession line begins to move and the driver starts his truck. The radio comes on. The passenger turns it off. The monotone snootiness of NPR's weekly word puzzles seems inappropriate at this time. Something about a hurricane or a tsunami or Iraq would have felt better. The almost middle-aged man stands at the curb and watches the hearse lead the way out of the parking lot followed by the limousines. He runs back over to the window of the truck and knocks wildly, almost pounding.

"He's gone break my window." The driver throws the truck into park, opens the door and steps out. The car behind doesn't honk. It just stops and idles quietly.

"Please, I need to find my kids. Here. I'll pay you." The almost middle-aged man begs taking out a fistful of coins. The driver looks at him.

"Do I look like I need your crack change asshole? By the time I've walked into work and taken a piss, I've made more money then you will in an entire month. Your kids are fine. Fuck off. Go home."

The almost middle-aged man suddenly becomes calm, "No."

"You're not getting a ride. Go home."

"Drive me," the almost middle aged man demands.

"No." The driver points beyond the trees towards Hespeler and shakes his head, "Home. Now. Or I call the cops."

The almost middle-aged man steps back and stares at the driver. He puts his change in his pocket. He nods and stands back. The driver gets in his truck, puts it into drive and eases forward. The almost middle-aged watches the procession line pass. His

eyes tear until large drops plop out of his eyes and run down his cheeks. The passenger turns around and watches the almost middle-aged man until they slowly turn the corner. He turns around and looks at his cousin, "Did you cry today?"

"Why do you ask?" the driver lights another smoke off his previous, "Should I have cried?"

"I don't know."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm sad."

"I know that. I'm not saying that you aren't."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I'm just asking."

"And you? Don't answer. I saw you. You cried. You tried to stop it though."

"Are you saying that I shouldn't have?"

"Stopped or cried?"

"Either."

"Neither. I was just noticing. I'm just making conversation."

"Yes," the passenger says looking out the window and shifting in his seat, "I did cry."

"Well it makes sense," the driver says, "you have a family now. These things are more important to you."

"You have family too."

“Not the same thing. I mean you have your own family-- a wife and a baby. You have everything.”

“And what about you? What do you have? Nothing?”

“I have everything but everything.”

“Come on. You’re talking nonsense. Drink up.”

“Listen, I have brother and sister, nieces and nephews, cousins, aunts, uncles.”

The driver sips at the flask and swallows, “and all of those people are wonderful but I have no one to come home to. I live in an apartment above a Vietnamese hair salon. The closest person in my life right now is my neighbour. He’s a computer technician at Great Deals Superstore. He’s got all of Pacino’s movies, a 360, a flat screen but even he’s gotta girl...”

“Yeah, yadda-yadda-yadda... roll down the window. The brandy just hit me.”

“We’re different, you and I,” the driver says as he rolls slowly through a red light. He looks out the window at the cars that can’t go though the light even though it’s green. He can’t see through their windshields to see whether or not they’re pissed. The sun is too bright. “It’s not a question of family. It’s about not having anyone that you’re close to. I’m surrounded by people but I have no one. I work the graveyard shift because it’s more money but for what? When I’m done, I don’t even want to go back to my apartment. I drive around listening to NPR. NPR. Me. I know everything there is to know about Turkish elections, bilateral Pacific Rim trade relations, the Euro bottoming but the yen still going strong... yadda-yadda-yadda...”

“You know there are always places you can go.”

“There’s no-where I can go that I haven’t been already. I’ve done everything that I’ve wanted to do. There’s no-where for me so I just go to work. I pay my bills. I clean my apartment. NPR for fuck’s sake. I’m just bored. I’m sure that you don’t get it. When you go home, the lights are on. It’s warm. Your wife is there. Your baby.”

“You’re always welcome to come over for a visit but listen, I need a quick nap or I’m liable to drop her. You mind?”

“No. It’s fine. Go ahead. I don’t care.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Night,” says the passenger.

“Good night,” the driver says. Taking his foot off the accelerator, he creeps through stop signs and red lights, too slow even for a funeral procession. He watches the cars traveling in the opposite direction. Some carry on without thinking twice but most pull off to the shoulder, at least until the hearse passes. While his cousin breathes deeply and drunken beside him, the driver talks to himself. Lately, he’s been doing that more and more but, he reasons, people do this all the time. At least he doesn’t answer himself like some people he knows. At least he’s never tried to kill himself. At least he’s not almost middle-aged. Still though, he thinks about these things. Funerals. His funeral and what it would be like. Who would come? Who would be in the limos? Would there even be limos? Or would there just be pallbearers using the purple flag to give the finger all the



snooty MADD bitches of the world? A never-ending processional of drunk drivers against mothers?

His eyes roll inside his skull as the brandy washes over him and he suddenly feels slightly drunk which means in the next few minutes he'll be really drunk. He throws on the turning signal and breaks formation at the next stop sign, performing a sharp and squealing u-ey. The sudden movement wakes the passenger, "Where are you going?"

"Back."

"Why?"

"I forgot something."

The passenger shrugs, too drunk now to do anything but resign himself to the strangeness of a sad day. He feels in his pocket for the flask, "You want another drink?"

"No thanks," says the driver and speeds up. He dislikes the taste of brandy and is only drinking it because it's strong. A beer is all he wants but later. Now, without thinking further, he drives fast, abusing the privileges of the purple flag. His family would wait and accept. After all, he reasons to himself, my family is always my family and they have to forgive and forget and yadda-yadda-yadda all the stupid things that I do.

He turns down Hespeler.

OATES

FOR NIKKI GIOVANNI

“Who the fuck is Bob Dylan?”

Her name is Karen. She is fourteen and she has recently developed a swearing habit that no one in her family particularly cares for. Her father scolds Karen for her language. “Stop swearing. Who are you? You think you’re a grown up? You talk like a man and not a good one,” he says. Karen purses her lips but says nothing, opting instead to stare through her father at the poster of a shadowy wind-swept old man tacked up to the wall of the garage. At one time Karen’s father had been a grease-monkey pot head, if one could believe the classic rock posters, incense burners and dancing-bear fridge magnets decorating the garage. But what little was left of this man disappeared when his only son left for Iraq.

“Why can’t you be more respectful?” *Like Finn*, Karen almost mouths while her father continues, “How do you even survive in school with a mouth like that? What the hell are your marks like anyway? F’s? You should show some respect. Act like a lady for a change. You don’t think your brother could talk trash like that now, do you?”

Karen doesn’t really care about Finn. She doesn’t care that he’s turning twenty-one in a couple months. She doesn’t care that he’ll probably spend his birthday in a bombed-to-shit bunker on the outskirts of Baghdad. Finn deserves what he gets; he is such an idiot and no one but Karen seems to notice. Everyone loves Finn. Finn is a hero. Finn is a patriot. Finn is fighting for freedom. Finn is helping to liberate blah-blah-blah

nation for the sake of blah-blah-blah. *Whatever-the fuck-ever. He thinks he's an army of one, army-strong or thinks he's any one of the other army tags used to fill the heads of twenty-something-year-old boys with trashy save-the-world dreams of blowing shit up.*

"Mom wanted me to let you know that dinner is on the table."

"I'll be right in."

Karen leaves her father in the garage and knows that he's lying. He won't be in. Ever since Finn left this has been her father's routine-- he comes home from work, stays in the garage watching CNN until suppertime, eats silently and then goes back out to the garage where he drinks and drinks and only when everyone else is finally asleep, will he too climb into bed. He doesn't much bother talking except to criticize his wife. This normally doesn't faze Karen but ever since her grandmother died three days ago, he's started in on Karen in addition to stepping up his abuse of his wife and Karen is getting tired of it.

Karen walks in the house and sits down at the table across from her mother. Her mother eats self-consciously, afraid that at any moment Karen's father will walk into the house and start making under-handed fat jokes at her expense. Looking at her mother, Karen finds herself wishing that her father had died instead of Grandma McKanen. Karen's heard that anti-freeze in the coffee is a good way to go. Painless. Makes you drunk and then your kidneys give out and then you go to sleep. *You just don't wake up,* Karen shares with her on-line friends after dinner. Her mother is in the kitchen scrubbing

out the dishes and Karen is back up in her bedroom annihilating a bunch of Bangoli college students studying in Canada in a game of capture-the-flag.

There is only one good thing in Karen's life: video games. She plays many games with people from all over the world and she is one of the best. She doesn't *think* this. She knows this. She has a reputation online, with one noob describing her as the baddest ass mother fucker on the entire server. She's an elite and a girl-- a true rarity.

When Karen hears about girls on the wrestling team arching and flipping some three-hundred-pound fat ass, she smiles knowingly. Karen feels for the lone girl on the hockey team when she steps onto the ice. She knows what it is like to have every guy on that girl's team, afraid that she's weak, go out of their way to protect her even though she doesn't need it. She's wearing the same pads as they are. She can take a hit. She also knows what it is like to have every guy on the other team play dirty, intent on punishing *that stupid whore* who dares to be something more than a cock-sucking puck bunny cheering from the stands. It's tough being a girl and being good at something. Natural talent isn't enough. Expectations are higher. Guys get by with simply being good at something. Karen knows that girls can't just be good. They have to be spectacular. She knows that greatness, true greatness takes hard work so no matter what game or what platform Karen makes sure that she is known, that she is feared and, most importantly, that she is respected.

Tonight, Karen moves seamlessly through a post-apocalyptic New York. With the help of her guildmates, Karen annihilates alien scum with her twin ION cannons and

routes the Bangolis into an alley behind some scuzzy porno theater. Perched in a perfect little crow's nest, she snipes them out one by one by one by one. She gives her last surviving opponent a flesh wound and walks over. Looking down, she taunts her opponent with an observation: *you couldn't hit water if you fell out of a boat... bitch.* Then she takes out her side arm, puts two in the back of his skull, pwning his ass to kingdom come. While they're busy re-spawning, Karen grabs the Bangoli's flag and returns it to her base at the feet of the headless Statue of Liberty. Her guildmates congratulate her.

"Thanks boys. I'll see everyone in chat."

Karen logs off the server and goes into a chat room with her guild to plan the next time they're getting together. Almost everyone in her guild is older than her and male, even if they say they aren't. The chat room is sometimes very busy with people but is always busy with bots offering everything from a bigger penis to cheap off-shore pharmaceuticals to sure-fire stocks to singles sites brimming with bored Russian women who somehow happened upon Karen's email address stuffed in their panty drawer. *Please click here.* Tonight, it's just plain busy and Karen only talks with people she knows.

It's safer that way and they're generally nice people. They care what she thinks about stuff. They ask her how her brother is even though she always answers the same way-- *not dead yet but I am hopeful.* Karen tells her friends that her grandma just died and that her father is making her go to the funeral. Her friends tell her that they are sorry about her grandma. Karen laughs out loud, *I couldn't care less.*

Then a random user named “?” messages Karen asking *when did she die?*

Random messages are nothing new. Karen gets them all the time. She ignores most but sometimes she chats, more out of curiosity than anything else. Tonight, she’s curious and checks out ?’s profile. ? is an Asian boy with a Caesar haircut in need of a slight trim. In his photo he’s straddling a chair and smiling at something out of frame, out of time. She types a reply and there’s a long wait. Long enough that Karen thinks ? is no longer there but then he messages her saying *sorry* but he went to get something to eat. *It’s okay.* ? says that he knows what she’s going through because he lost a grandma this year. Karen breaks her own rules and chats back. There is no reason. She does this because she feels like it. They’re not really rules anyway-- more like guidelines.

She spends an hour and a half chatting with ?. She finds out that he is 18, lives a few states over and will be starting a Computer Science degree this fall but is seriously considering switching to Creative Writing when he gets to school because he wants to be a famous science fiction writer like Philip K. Dick or Issac Asimov. He says his parents will disapprove because getting a good paying job is so important to them. But he doesn’t care. He’s going to do it anyway. Karen asks what games he plays.

*I really like classic games. Castle Wolfenstein is my all time favourite.*

*I have that.*

*You are lying.*

*No I’m not. Wanna play?*

*Yes. I would like that very much. Do you want to be Axis or Allied?*

Karen rolls her eyes and types a reply, *Obviously Axis... the Allies don't have the Luger or the flamethrower and they're grenades suck ass...*

They log onto the server and are dropped down in the middle of some mountains on the outskirts of a small Austrian village. Karen checks her headpiece's microphone, "Can you hear me?"

"That is a roger."

Karen presses TAB and looks through the names of the players on the server. "It looks like we're the only Nazis on the block. Apparently, everyone else wanted to be the good guys."

"So it is you and me against everyone else? We do not have to do this."

"Come on," Karen smiles at the strange stiffness in his voice. She always finds it slightly weird hearing someone's voice for the first time without seeing their face, "You and me against the world? A small chance of success? You bet your sweet ass I'm doing this. Try to keep up, sugar tits."

They start in the basement of an occupied warehouse carved into the side a mountain. They have to make their way up through the warehouse to a gondolier which will take them down to the village. They climb stairs and see the main warehouse door. ? enters first. Karen follows and trains her luger on a stack of gasoline drums at the back of the warehouse just in case the enemy charges in while ? is exploring. She can take out half of her enemies with one shot. "Clear?"

"Clear. How did your grandma die?"

“Stroke, fuck.” Karen ducks behind a stack of crates, “Upper left corner. See him?”

? crouches behind a truck and strafes around the corner to see a player pacing back and forth, “Yes. I think it is one of their medics. The gondolier should be through that door.”

“First blood. Called it.” Karen takes out her sniper rifle and zooms in, “Look at him. He has no clue we’re here. My guess, there’s gonna be some infantry out front so get ready. They’re gonna come rushing in all at once when I smoke this mother fucker.” Karen presses down once on her left mouse button. The medic’s head explodes.

“That was a very nice shot.”

“Thank you,” Karen smiles. Alerted by the death of their teammate, Karen’s prediction comes true. The Allied forces swarm into the warehouse but there’s only one door so it forces them into a bottleneck.

? lobes a pipe bomb towards the stack of gasoline drums. Explosions. Flying body parts, sprays of blood, chunks of bone and marrow all whizz pass Karen. “Was it in a nursing home or a hospital?”

“The fuck are you talking about? Get your head in the game!”

“Your grandma. Did she die in a nursing home or a hospital?” ? switches to the flamethrower and creates a wall of flame at the bottleneck which they have to pass through in order to enter the room. Some back off but most charge through the flame. They catch on fire and start flailing around trying to put themselves out. If they were



playing Postal: Share the Pain, they could pee on themselves to put the flames out but they're not playing PSTP. They're playing Castle Wolfenstein and once on fire, there's no way to not end up a crispy critter. Karen almost feels sorry for them. Almost.

"Look at these guys. Amateurs." Karen snipes out the remaining Allied Forces, "Jesus Christ. Make an effort. Nursing home," Karen loots her kills, "You know one of those places where each ward is a street named after a tree? Poplar Boulevard? Spruce Avenue? Oakwood Drive? There's a tuck shop that sells bags of ribbon candy, black licorice and stuffed quilt geese that wear bonnets and sun dresses? Bocci bowling on Tuesday, Geriatric Yoga on Wednesday, monthly Sex into your Eighties seminars and weekly doses of pet therapy..."

"What is pet therapy?"

"You've never heard of pet therapy?" After dressing her wounds, Karen injects herself with morphine and adrenaline, "Do you need some?"

"No. I did not get shot."

"You didn't take one hit?"

"No." ? repetitively jumps up and down waiting for Karen to heal, "So what is pet therapy?"

"They bring dogs and cats to visit old people."

"Why?"

“Makes them feel better, I guess. Except at my Grammie’s nursing home, most of the people there were farmers and farmers actually have a closer connection with hoofed animals like horses.”

“They brought horses into your grandma’s nursing home?”

“Of course not. A horse would shit everywhere. By the way, do you need any ammo?”

“No. I am good. What do they bring instead of horses?”

“Llamas, believe it or not. Hoofed like horses but they only shit in one area so you can take them into these homes and they’ll hold it until they get back to their pen.

Interesting, huh?”

“Yes that is very interesting. Are there many programs like this?”

“Three in the entire country and two of them are in California. You ready?”

They take the gondolier down to the village. While they scour the village for their opponent’s flag, ? keeps asking Karen questions, mostly about her family. Karen answers. Her father is an abusive drunk, her mother is obviously battered beyond repair. Her brother has been in Iraq for two years and is either too stupid to know or doesn’t care that he’s been stop-lossed at least twice. ? stops talking and crouches, “Get down.”

“What is it?”

“I can see their flag. Do you see their flag?”

“No.”

“Look across the square and through the window of the beer hall with your sniper scope. Right behind the barmaid. Switch your scope to night vision.”

Karen peers through her scope. Behind the buxom and non-playable barmaid holding a plate of kielbasa sausages and presumably stinky cheese is the glowing flag of the Allied forces, “Ah, yes. I got it. Do you have a plan?”

“You should lay down some suppressing fire and I will go in, bomb around corners. As long as you are covering me, I think that we should win this. This is very surprising to me.”

“No to me. I knew we would win. But listen to me.”

“Yes?”

“If you do this, there’s only one rule.”

“What is that rule?”

“Don’t die.” Karen wryly references a recent war movie as ? runs across the quaint frozen Austrian village. “I think I’m falling in love.”

“I promise you that I will not die, my darling.” ? says in a completely deadpan tone which Karen notes either means he gets the reference or it’s been lost entirely. Either way, she drops it.

Karen is impressed with ?. He has a good steady hand and keeps his cool in the midst of the fire fight. With the help of Karen’s excellent sniper work, he grabs the flag and the two of them haul ass back to the gondolier and head back up to the mountains.

Out of boredom repeatedly pressing space, they both jump up and down. Karen is the first to break the silence, “You`re good. Where`d you learn to shoot like that?”

“My father and grandfather taught me. My grandfather fought against the United States and my dad was in the military. They taught me how to fire gun, guerilla combat techniques, close-combat fighting.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The first time I held a gun, I was only three years old.”

“Like a real gun?”

“Yes.”

“I`ve never fired a real gun.”

“Held one?”

“No.”

“Would you like to?”

“Sure. You could teach me.”

“What did you say your name was?”

Karen smiles at her computer and looks over at the clock on her desk. It`s almost five o`clock in the morning. “I didn`t. Anyway, good game but I should really be getting to bed. It was nice meeting you.”

“May I add you?”

“Sure.”

“Good night.”

“Night.”

“I love you.”

“Okay.” Karen rolls her eyes and logs off. *Freak*. She deletes ? from her friends list, puts him on ignore, shuts down her computer and climbs into bed.

As morning gives way to afternoon, Karen wakes up and pads downstairs. Her mother stares disapprovingly at her. Her mother probably thinks that any lady that wakes up past noon is either a prostitute or a witch-- either way, definitely up to no good. She asks her daughter what time she finally got to bed. Karen cracks open a can of coke, shuts her eyes as she chugs more than half, burps and lies, “Twoish.”

“Well, go get dressed. Your father says we have to leave.”

“Jesus Christ, who cares what he says?”

“He doesn’t want us here when the lawyer’s here. Only family.”

“We are family, mom.”

“Only his family. His brothers and sister. Anyway, he’s made us an appointment.”

“An appointment for what?”

“To get our hair done. He says he wants us pretty for the wake.”

“We’re not fucking Catholic. We don’t have wakes.”

“Wake or viewing. Whatever. The point is your dad went out of his way to make sure that we look our best for tonight and we should be appreciative of his efforts.”

“His efforts, mom? He probably made the appointment at a barber shop. We’re going to walk in, they’re going to wrap hot towels around our faces and there’s gonna be copies of Hustler on the magazine rack. I swear to God. You think I’m shitting you? I’m not.”

“Go and get dressed. And stop swearing.”

Karen stomps upstairs, gets dressed and comes back downstairs, “Well, let’s go then.”

They follow the directions Karen’s father left stuck to the fridge. Karen’s somewhat impressed that it’s not at a barber shop but it’s almost as bad. He made the appointment at the college’s beauty school. Karen wouldn’t trust most of these girls with a pair of plastic scissors and one of those toy heads that sprouts play dough hair, let alone *real hair*. Karen slowly and deliberately tells the girl that is doing her hair to style it only and that if she picks up any type of cutting instrument-- be it scissors, razors, clippers or whatever-- that Karen will shove them up her ass and walk out. Her mom is more trusting and lets an eighteen-year-old girl cut her hair and chat on like-like-like-like-like-like-like. Karen’s mother is spun around to face the mirror when the girl is finished and her face falls. A banged and curled mass dyed an unnaturally dark brown that looks like it would be perfectly suited for a Parisian fashion model sits on top of the upside down heart shaped face of Karen’s mother who smiles and says, “Oh. How nice. Karen?”

“What?”

“What do you think?”

Karen stares in the mirror at her own reflection. She has the same type of hair as one of those Mormon polygamist child brides-- a high and poofy pony tail which is then separated and twisted back in on itself to make a pony tail. Also for some reason, the chick stuck in Baby's Breath at random and odd places. Karen is not impressed, "I think I'm hungry."

Her mother smiles brightly, "How about Shetfields?"

Karen doesn't care.

Shetfields Tea Room is a frilly haven where the Q-tip crowd goes to meet every day, except Sundays, for high tea and bridge. No men go there. It's not that they are not explicitly told not to come. It's more just a custom. Every time Karen's mother takes her to Shetfields, she either uses it as an opportunity to safely complain about her husband or else she wants to have serious and lady-like conversations with her daughter. The day Karen got her first period, her mother took her there for afternoon tea so that she could explain the finer points of a *woman's monthly visitor*. Over cucumber sandwiches, Karen learned from her mother that during her flow a lady never goes swimming, she should always stay away from dogs and that if she wanted to remain a technical virgin until she was married, a young lady uses sanitary napkins instead of tampons. Today, from the moment they sit down for lunch, Karen's mother purposely seems to steer the conversation away from her husband and makes the afternoon all about boys. Boys, boys, boys, boys, boys, boys.

Karen's mother dreams up numerous possible options for her daughter but all the boys she mentions bleed together in Karen's mind-- a mish-mash of well-mannered wieners destined, after serving their way through college in the National Guard, to become lawyers or CBA's. Despite Karen's blatant disinterest, her mother keeps flipping through an invisible portfolio of potential suitors, "What about the Pettinger boy? He's a nice..."

And Karen laughs and almost spits Earl Grey into her carrot soup, "Andy Pettinger, Mom? That ass? You're not serious, are you? I heard from Chris Cardulla that after gym class Andy showers with his underwear on."

The only people within earshot of Karen and her mother are an ancient raisin-faced granny and a botoxed late-fifties woman wearing the hyper-professional attire of someone who's bought into the executive-assistant-is-not-the-same-thing-as-a-secretary bullshit. They do their best to ignore the unlady-like language by clearing their throats and simultaneously asking one another to *go fish*. Karen's mother's ears turn red and she stares into the gurgling potpourri at the centre of the table, "Karen, ladies do not talk about young men in such a way."

"Well, I can only talk about what I've heard."

"He is a nice boy and you would be very lucky to find someone like him." She frowns and dips her fork into her salad dressing before stabbing through some lettuce,



ensuring that only a minimal amount of Ranch enters her body because she knows it will all go straight to her thighs and that her husband will be the first one to notice.

Karen and her mother do not speak through the rest of their late lunch and Karen discreetly focuses on the way her mother eats. Karen's mother knows all the forks and all the spoons. She tips her soup bowl away from her to properly gather the last drip of carrot soup. Her butter knife rests on her plate at three o'clock. There is not one crumb out of place. Karen wistfully imagines her mom as something other than a house wife, something like a sexy assassin in a leather cat suit that shows off her washboard abs and tits of steel while she takes out foreign dignitaries before going to a cocktail party where she'll tango with a rival Saudi spy who has great eyes, nice hair and a sexy ass. Something like that. But her mom doesn't even have a career let alone a cool one. Over coffee and hot-buttered scones, Brahm's Lullaby electronically tinkles from somewhere inside Karen's mother's big wicker purse. She answers and after a brief conversation, snaps it shut. "Well, the good news is that we can go home now. The lawyer has finished. But we need to stop on our way back and pick up some more rye."

"Mom, Dad's been drinking a shit load lately. You don't have to put up with that just because his mom died. I mean seriously, what the fuck?"

"Well, we'll just buy cheap stuff then," appreciating the message but ignoring the language, Karen's mother smiles, folds her napkin into a little swan and places it on her plate.

The drive home is quiet and Karen's mother keeps looking in the rearview mirror as if trying to figure out what to do with her hair. They pull in the driveway just after five which gives Karen enough time to have a shower before her family piles into the van and heads into the city for the six-thirty viewing. Karen is the last one in and as she's buckling up, her father asks her if she's interested in singing at the grave site. Karen says that she'll think about it if the price is right. "I am not paying you to sing at my mother's funeral," her father snaps, "Your grandmother I might add." Karen shrugs, puts her wet hair up into a bun and tilts her chair back to watch wave after wave of farmland roll past.

Her father drives self-consciously, drunk, chewing minty gum and chugging an after can of Coke but Karen also knows that he's got an ass pocket full of rye too. She notices her mother's stare, half sorrow-filled daughter-in-law, half confused. There's an empty seat beside Karen that at one time would have sat the hyper-active Finn who perfectly straddled the line between respectful firstborn and tormenting older brother. Karen leans her chair back, shuts her eyes and feels the light of the setting sun flicker through the trees against her lids. Rural farm scape gives way to the sparse green spaces of urban sprawl's outskirts. They're running late. They drive through the city and pull into the funeral home only to find that the lot is full so they have to loop back out and search for an open parking space. Karen's mother clears her throat, "Honey?"

He doesn't answer.

"Honey?"

Still nothing.

“Honey”

“What!”

“There’s a meter right there.”

“Fuck them running if they think I’m paying for parking at my own mother’s funeral.”

“You swear like a man, Dad and not a good one.”

“Shut your God damned mouth, Karen.” Her father then looks over at his wife,  
“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Change, deary-dear, do you have some change? Nickels? Dimes? Quarters?”

“Oh. Well. I’m not sure. I don’t think so but...” she opens her purse and breathes out heavily, “Well, let me check.”

It’s too hot in the car so Karen leaves her parents fishing around in the wicker purse for quarters and goes inside the funeral home. An older woman standing in the entrance welcomes Karen with a smile which after years of tasting formaldehyde in the recirculated air must be perpetually stuck, “Good evening.” She says, “And who are you here with?”

“McKanen.”

“Parlor D. I am sorry for your loss.”

The funeral home is busy yet quiet tonight. The parlors go all the way up to the letter J and each one is in use. Karen sees signs of her family everywhere mixed in with

grieving strangers. Uncle William shakes towards the bathroom with Parkinsons. Two of her littlest cousins sit in front of a faux fireplace, french-braiding each other's hair and chattering on as if everything were normal and good. A dark and distant kinky-haired cousin in a leather jacket and nursing scrubs looks tired all over as he helps his huge and pale mother squirm out of her jacket; a tattoo of Minnie Mouse giving Mickey Mouse head is barely visible over her left breast. Karen walks away from her family and into an empty quiet room where pitchers of water sweat and two coffee makers murmur gently to themselves. Karen is glad to be alone. She pours herself a coffee and stares down at her sandals. And then, a spilled ink feeling slowly creeps into her stomach and down over her shoulders and up between her toes. She cannot explain why she feels this but she instinctively knows that she is not alone. She turns around to see a young Asian man with a skinned scalp, full of pimples. "Please say cheese." He snaps a picture of her with his cell phone.

"What the fuck?"

"I am not late, am I? Do you like my new phone? I just got it."

"Who are you?"

"You know who I am."

"No, I don't. Seriously, who are you?"

"I am Question Mark," he smiles and steps in to give her a tin man hug, "It is so good to finally meet you. I am so, so sorry about Grandma McKanen."

“Question Ma-- from last night?” She places her coffee cup on the edge of the counter.

“Yes,” he says, sliding the coffee cup over to safety,” that is me. You did not tell me what your real name was but I found out. Karen. Karen Grace...” and for the briefest of moments, an edge of sloppiness creeps into his deep robotic voice and he smiles gently. This sends Karen into an ever slower panic, her throat fights against swallowing a nothing which chokes her as she forces it down. Karen looks over Question Mark’s shoulder for someone, anyone, doesn’t care who. He gestures with his skinned head. “They are all in the funeral parlor with Grandma McKanen. Have you seen her yet?”

Karen shakes her head.

“She does look very nicely dressed but I did not expect her hands to be so cold. I wonder if this is normal?”

“Look, I want you to go.”

“What?” Question Mark’s flatness breaks again but he lifts his arms up to the ceiling performing what looks like a cheap imitation of human frustration. “I only came here because you said you loved me. I want to be there for you.”

“Listen, I’m sorry if you thought that but that was a joke. A movie reference. I really don’t love you. In fact, I don’t want you here so please, get out.”

“You are sorry? I drove all night to be with you because I love you back and now you are just going to say sorry and ask me to leave? Oh I am very sorry but I was only joking when I said love you. I even got you a present. Can you guess what it is?” Karen

shakes her head as he reaches behind him, pulls out a Luger and lays it on the counter beside the coffee machine. Karen tries to duck past him and get a scream out but he is too fast and grabs her forearm, slaps his hand over her mouth before a single sound can be heard. He leans in to her. Karen can feel his lips against her ear lobe as he whispers, "Do not scream. That is a real luger and it is loaded with real hollow point bullets. Do you know what those are? You have no clue, do you? I can teach you so many things, Karen Grace, about so many things. For example, did you know that upon entry hollow point bullets spread out causing internal damage nearly quadrupling the diameter of the entry wound? Do you think anyone here knows that interesting little nugget? Maybe they need a demonstration. Maybe before I leave, I will oblige them by providing that demonstration. But if you think they would better off without demonstration, you had better act like a perfect lady. That means no screaming, no acting crazy and having some manners. Do you understand, Karen Grace?"

Karen nods.

"I hope that you are telling the truth, Karen because if you're not, I can kill every last person in here to teach you, to make you see the difference between right and wrong. That would be the right thing to do. But I know that you do not want that so when I take my hand away from your mouth, you will be so nice and so perfect that I won't even need to worry. We're just going to have a conversation. Now," he removes his hand from her mouth, "Have you seen Grandma McKanen yet?"

"No," Karen draws in her breath slowly through her nose.

“Well you should go see her before we leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Yes you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Remember your manners, Karen Grace.”

“What do you want?” Karen whispers.

“I want us.”

“What?”

“Last night when you told me that it was you and me against the world, I knew that I had found the woman I would be spending the rest of my life with. I was so excited that I could barely sleep last night and when I finally fell asleep, I had a dream.”

“What did you dream about?”

Question Mark’s voice drops to an almost childlike whisper as he reaches down, lifts up the leg of his jean, reaches down into his combat boot and under his sock to scratch. “I saw us traveling across America at midnight putting things right. All of this decadent bullshit crumbled around us and we were driving down I-61 from Chicago to New Orleans robbing banks and listening to AM radio shift as we made our way through county after county. We were armed to the teeth. We would drive for days without sleep. Living in each other’s arms. When your body would give out from exhaustion, you would fall asleep in my arms and I would look down on you. You looked so tired and beautiful

at the same time. I did not know what you looked like but you are exactly like you were in my dream.”

“You’re insane.” Karen wants to run out the set of doubles at the other end of the quiet room. They open onto a tiny garden with a koy pond and a high wrought iron fence. Karen thinks she can hop the fence but she’s afraid that Question Mark will think attempted escape is rude and will use it as an excuse to go on a shooting rampage. Someone walks past the room and Karen thinks she’s related to them somehow but she doesn’t remember their name. She turns back to Question Mark, “How did you... you can’t think... I’m...”

“Karen, you are not making any sense. Are you curious as to how I was able to locate you so efficiently? Well, you told me everything that I needed to know to find you. You told me the date your grandma died. You told me what she died from. You told me that she died in one of the three nursing homes in the entire country that have llama visitation and that the other two were in California. You told me everything that I needed to know to find you. All I needed to do was read through the obituaries looking for a woman who died of a stroke at a nursing home that has llama visitation. Very simple.” He slides out of the way, “Now, I think it is time for us to go see Grandma McKanen.”

Tiredness drapes over Karen, heavy as wet silk, and her legs almost give out. Steadying herself, she walks from the quiet room. Question Mark follows after Karen by rows of inspirational posters before passing a tank full of fish the colours of high school highlighters. They enter the funeral parlor.



Question Mark hangs back and Karen walks towards the casket. She stops and turns around to see that in between watching her, Question Mark casually picks up Grandma McKanen's Precious Moment figurines or flips through her old family albums, absorbing each and every tiny moment of private embarrassing family joy. Grandma McKanen wearing a stupid birthday hat and refusing to lift her bulldog jowls into a smile despite a birthday cake with a sparkler candle burning white hot at the center. Her wedding where laughing groomsmen flipped up their kilts at the camera only to reveal plaid golf socks stretched over their junk. Summers at the cottage.

Karen sees her second cousin from Arkansas across the room standing next to his mother. His name is Lenny and he is the only boy Karen's ever kissed. She was eleven. He was thirteen. Their families were vacationing at Grandma McKanen's cottage on Lake Michigan. They had gone for a walk on the dirty beach. He was busy emptying the shore by flipping flat dead fish, dried sea gull carcasses, driftwood, stones and shells into the lake. For some reason that she's long forgotten, Karen stopped Lenny, let her hand drift up his arm to his shoulder and pulled him into a kiss. He didn't try to pull away but instead kissed back as if trying to swallow her whole. Karen remembers the way his curiously slimy tongue felt against her own, how she tasted the perch dinner they had eaten only hours earlier at Grandma McKanen's Legion Hall. They didn't know what to do with their hands but Karen remembers that she was touching Lenny's elbows when Finn exploded through some dry brush, popped over some driftwood logs and fell down on the sand clutching his stomach he was laughing so hard. Lenny disappeared down the

darkness of the beach and Karen ran to the cottage crying. Finn followed but stopped at the bonfire to tell the adults that they would never believe what he had just seen.

Grandma McKanen snapped Finn up by his bicep as he was recounting the tale and told him to mind his p's and q's, buster. Finn was pissed off that no one else found it funny and still occasionally brought up the subject of Karen's future mutant children in his emails to her from Iraq. Karen has ignored Lenny ever since and every time she thinks of that summer, hot water bottle embarrassed nausea spreads across her stomach. That is every moment except now and Karen finds herself missing that feeling. She smiles at Lenny through tears and curls a wave at him. He stops for a moment and, surprised after all these years, waves back. Karen approaches the casket and looks down. The hair on Grandma McKanen's face is really noticeable and white. Her neck sags into the silvery silk pillow. Her once beaked nose is now flat and wide. Karen kneels down, "Grannie..."

She tells the body everything. *Your son is the worst person in the entire world. Finn will be joining you soon. There's a psycho behind me flipping through your photos and finger fucking your knick knacks. Aren't you going to get up and kick his ass? Grannie, I could use your help. You're the toughest woman I ever knew. Please..*

But she does nothing. She's dead. Karen gets up and walks back to Question Mark. "How did you know my name?"

"Your name is Karen."

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Maybe I'm lying. Maybe go fuck yourself."

“Karen Grace,” he mock scolds her, “are you done saying good bye because we really must get going.”

“Where?”

“Where what?”

“Where are we going?” she whispers, every word a bullet.

“Karen,” her father teeters over, “who’s this?”

“Dad,” Karen quickly slides her hand into Question Mark’s who smiles over at her, “This is my boyfriend. Boris Gustav,” saying the most ridiculous name she can think of with the hopes of tipping her father off, “Come say hello.”

“Little girl should watch what she says.” Question Mark whispers as he steps forward and bows deeply, “My name is Boris Gustav Mao Chan, sir and it is great pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. I have been bothering Karen to introduce me to her family for months and I am so sorry that it took the death of your mother for us to finally meet. I heard she was a great woman.”

“Yes,” Karen’s father half hiccups, half burps, “She was, thank-you, that’s very kind. So Boris, is it?”

Question Mark nods, “Boris Gustav Mao Chan, sir.”

“Well, Boris, what are your intentions towards me daughter?”

“I assure you, purely honourable, sir.”

“That’s good. Hell, I like honour. I love honour,” Karen’s father begins to cry.

Question Mark steps in and hugs her father a one-two-pat-on-the-back-man-hug.

Question Mark hushes him, "It is okay, sir, it is okay."

"I'm so sorry. That's my mother," he says pointing at the coffin.

Karen puts a hand on her dad's shoulder, "Dad, do you want me to go get mom? You could stay here with Boris. He's a really good listener."

Karen's dad starts laughing, "Who are you? Did you take your polite pills today because you're sure as shit not acting like my daughter. Tell me baby girl, what the fuck do you think that a woman is going to do for me? Boris, come here. Man-to-man, I wanna tell you something. You wanna know why I married her mother?"

"Yes, sir."

"I married her because I could run her down. I could bowl that bitch over. She's a weakling, a fat house cat without claws. I can say or do anything to this woman and she won't leave me. That's the secret to a successful marriage. Find a woman who will never leave you. You need yourself a mushroom woman, a woman who doesn't mind being kept in the dark and fed shit. That's her mother. That's the woman I married. They're the best type out there, mushroom women. If you find one, don't let her go."

"I will remember that sir."

Karen's father giggles, "I like you, Boris. I always thought my daughter was kind of a bitch but what the fuck? I mean why don't you and come join my brothers and me for a drink? I really like you."

"Dad, I think you're done for the night."

"Don't tell me when I'm done, Karen."

Grabbing her bicep Question Mark smiles at Karen's father as he pulls her away, "She gets really upset, Mr. McKanen. I will talk to her. Would you come for a walk with me, Karen?"

"I'd rather introduce you around. My mother maybe?"

"Karen," he warns, "You are going to go for a walk with me."

"Karen..." her father echoes Question Mark. "Don't go bothering your mother. You know how she gets. She can't handle this so why don't you listen for once and go for a walk with Boris and remember to be thankful your brother is fighting for your right to take walks in the first place

and it doesn't matter whether you agree with the call to arms, it only matters that you answer..."

"Yes, Karen, let's go."

"Let go of my arm."

"Woah, you sure you wanna stay with this one, Boris? Remember. Mushroooooom."

He says it like he's a magician says ta-da.

"She is quite a handful, sir."

"You're telling me. Do you know that she doesn't even know who Bob Dylan is? You know who Bob Dylan is, right?"

"A singer."

"That's right. See Karen? A singer. What's your favourite Dylan song, Boris?"

"I appreciate all of his songs, sir. What is your favourite?"

“My favourite song? I don’t have one. Not anymore.” Karen’s father teeters slightly and sits down in a chair as a shadow of nausea passes across his face, “I’m sorry Boris. Karen, go for a walk with Boris.”

Question Mark puts his hand behind his back and stares at Karen. He’s grabbing the gun. Her father stares across the room at his mother and sees his son. Generations of her family circle and ignore the casket at the same time.

“Are you ready to come with me Karen? I drove my Jeep here. It is blue. I want you to come with me.”

Karen walks.

“Karen. Did you hear me? I’m talking to you.”

Karen walks out into the hallway, passing all sorts of people until she gets to a row of pay phones. She picks up the phone.

“Karen. Put the phone down. Do not forget what I have.”

Karen keeps dialing.

“Karen,” Question Mark leans in. Karen can feel his breath on the back of her neck and the barrel of the luger sticking into her back. His voice is quiet, “You can do what you want but the next time you see me you better run away because if you think I’m going to forget.”

Karen hangs the receiver up, shuts her eyes and thinks about what has to be done. She sees two possible options. She also finds herself for the first time knowing what choice is the right one but being unable to make it.

“Come on, Karen Grace, leave this place and none of your family will get hurt. Come with me out to the highway. It’s the only place I know for people like us. I will show you what life is.” Question Marks leans even closer into her and buries his face in-between her neck and shoulder. He breathes in deeply. “This world, your family isn’t for you. They will never accept what you are. You are like a beautiful flower that grew out of a pot of dirt. You have to leave them. You are meant for something more and if you stay here, you’ll just hurt them or cause them to get hurt. You want that, don’t you?” Question Mark asks, “Karen? Turn around and face me.”

“You know what?” Karen turns on her heels and faces Question Mark, “I don’t think you will shoot them. I don’t think you’re capable of shooting anyone. In fact, I’m so sure that I’m going to turn around, dial 911 and when I turn back around you better be gone or you better fucking start shooting and you better start with me.”

? stares at her as she turns around and dials 911.

“911 emergency. Police, fire or ambulance?”

“Police.”

“One moment.”

“Please state the nature of the emergency.”

“Yes, I’m at a funeral home and there’s a man here with a gun.”

“Can you see this man?”

“He’s right behind me.”

“Can you describe him?”

Karen turns around. ? is no longer there. He's gone. Vanished. Karen closes her eyes and listens for gun shots to start ringing, people to start screaming and running but there is nothing.

"Ma'am? Are you there? Can you see this man?"

"He's gone."

"What do you mean gone?"

"I mean he's not here."

"Do you know where he's going?"

"No."

"Do you know where he's been?"

"No. He's gone."

"We're sending a unit out. What is your name?"

Karen hangs up.



## UPDIKE

Man... in walks three loud queens all done up in hooker gear. I'm standing in front of the till and can see the entire coffee shop from where I'm planted. The one that first catches my eye, well, she's got frizzy fried blonde hair and is wearing a red leather corset, black leather panties, fishnet stockings and thigh high stilettos. Her tits are real and she's done a good job tucking but her Adam's apple bobs up and down when she laughs. I stand there, wishing for some reason that when given the uniform options for Dunkin' Donuts, I had opted for the ball cap instead of the boyish two-tone visor. I also try to remember what my cousin standing in front of me wants in his coffee. I reach over and pull a medium cup from the stacks, four on four. My cousin watches me get his coffee and only when I slide the cup over does he start giving me hell. He knows my manager and got me this job so I guess he thinks he's entitled to play the bitch every now and then but I disagree. I don't think I have to take any guff from him. He's one of them assembly line guys, a late twenties douche with a grade ten education who pulls in six figures and drives to work stoned out of his trumpet in a souped up truck where he takes his breaks early to come over to my work to buy food because he's thrown away the lunch my aunt made for him while he was passed out from the night before in his room which is in his parents basement of course. He comes in all the time and seems to be always waiting on me to make a mistake just so he can jump all over me.

By the time I get him his coffee and donut-- as he leaves he gives me a look as if I were so defective that had I been born during the ancient times, my parents, his aunt and

uncle, would have been rightly justified leaving me exposed on the river bank, naked on the side of a snowy mountain or throwing me wailing from the walls of the acropolis and letting me tumble down to the mass baby graves below-- by the time I get him on his way and out of mine, my queens are sitting and sorting through rumpled bills on a sticky table. There's this really skinny one with bright pink hair wearing a Catholic school girl outfit. The whole fantasy's there, man-- blouse, blazer with the Virgin Mary or some such shit sewn on the breast pocket, a sassy little tie slightly unnoosed, a short plaid mini-skirt and white knee highs. I can't see her shoes. She has the potential to be the cutest but is still obviously a baby in queen terms. Her eyebrows still mannish. I don't think her tits are quite real just yet and I'm pretty sure I catch glimpses of stubble every now and then. She's also got the most attitude out of all of them and talks real dirty, like trucker dirty (not tranny dirty, if one catches my meaning). So there's this Catholic school girl queen, the straight-up tramped out hooker queen and then, there's a third one and, man, I gotta say, girl takes my breath away. She's fatter than the other two but she could probably pass for the real. She obviously is the king queen of the queens. Their leader.

Her hair is right done up in a real classy mess of ringlets and is this real strange tint that kinda looks silver, brown and blonde all at the same time. She's wearing a fur coat over what's gotta be an old bride's maid dress that she don't quite fit into right. She's got on jewellery too-- maybe real, I don't know for sure but boy, I gotta say, are they ever shiny. What I'm trying to say is that she don't even look like no hooker. She looks like one of them high-class escorts or one of them chicks from the infomercials that

are on after the late-late night talk shows end, the kind that writhe around silk sheets and beg for me to call them 'cause they just get so stinking bored with their husband gone to work. Walking into a coffee shop surrounded by tool and dye plants at 2:47 in the morning can't be easy for any female, let alone a tranny hooker, so I suppose a girl's gotta look her best.

She's gotta feel me and over my shoulder Rocko the donut maker looking at her because she smiles, gets up and makes her way over to my till. She doesn't take much notice of me, instead keeps her eyes trained on the wall behind me. Her eyes quickly flick back and forth, almost excited-like, like she's reading a real good book or something like that but she smiles real slow. So slow that it makes my gut feel like it's trying to punch its way out my body, and encouraged by her two friends, she takes in the entire Boston Cream-Honey Crueller-Old Fashioned-Old Fashioned Glazed-Old Fashioned Dip-Dutchie-Strawberry Filled- Lemon Filled-Honey Dip-Sour Cream-Maple Dip-Toffee Glazed-Canadian Maple and Apple Fritter wall of donuts behind me. She straightens up and orders a Boston Cream, an Old Fashioned Glazed and a Dutchie before rejoining her ladies-in-waiting at the table. The Catholic School girl really wants her donut. The few guys here, shift-sheep every single one of them, are pretty hilarious. I can see them, when the Catholic School girl takes a big old munch out of her Boston Cream, trying to not stare and stare all at the same time. They switch from looking deep into their coffee, to looking at each other and quickly up at my ladies. I bet I could stand on the counter, strip stark naked, lube myself up with lard and fire one off into the egg salad while reciting the

Pledge of Allegiance backwards and not cause as much ruckus as these girls are causing simply by eating their donuts and laughing. The tool and dye guys here staring into their coffee mutter, "I sure do hope overtime stays steady this month because things are getting tight" or whatever it is they care about but there's no lick of doubt in my mind. These girls trip them up. It's one thing to see these types of girls on the Internet or in movies and another thing altogether to see them stroll into a Dunkin' Donut's at Holy Christ knows when, laughing and hoovering back donuts while they talk about what they did to the tricks they done turned tonight. Sweet Christmas, I ain't never even heard of half the stuff they're talking about. Cleveland Steamer? Tibetan Sun Glasses? Alabama Clam Bake? Shit, I've barely felt up two girls in my whole life and one of them was my fat cousin from out of state. And I gotta say that bitch must've weighed two tons if she weighed a pound. Some might say relations don't count but two drops in a bucket, mother fuck it, right? Far as I'm concerned a tit is a tit is a tit is a tit.

"Oh man," Rocko says besides me, "You ever seen real ones before?"

"No," I say, "What you think?" Rocko got a chick with a tramp stamp he thought was on the pill knocked up earlier this year but near as I figure, that's the only difference between him and me. Except of course, he's nineteen, and I just turned sixteen this past March.

"Whatchya mean what I think? I think they're faggots," he says the guy who never just once got a little curious suddenly finds his voice. I forgot to say that he's the one who told me to check out this website where chicks have dicks but that's okay. What he really

means to say is our city is pretty Christian in one way or another. That's not to say there ain't no queers but they generally aren't like the type on TV. There's no parades or nothing. Some are even married with wives and like, six kids but as long as they keep their business to the truck stops and parks on the outskirts of the city, no one gives much of a shit who puts what where. Like I say, we're pretty Christian here, man. Hell, I can't drive from one end of this city to the other and not pass a block that doesn't have some kinda church on it. I mean, it's not like we're in Texas where folk pistol whip and hogtie faggots to barbed wire fences. People around here just like things a certain way and if someone happens to be particular in their tastes, it's appreciated by all concerned if they just keep it to themselves.

The girls walk over to my manager Lisa and ask her something. She points and they blow her kisses, strike some silly model poses and wave bu-bye as they disappear into the bathroom. I can't see which one they go into because there's a door that leads into a little room where there's three doors. One that leads to the pisser, another leads to the ladies room and the last is a supply closet with cleaning supplies, toilet paper and the like. Lisa walks over to me, "Lenny?"

"Yes'm?"

"Why don't you go on and do your bathroom duties now?"

I already know where this is going to end and it's not going to be pretty. I know that much. She doesn't need to do this. The shop's pretty much empty and hardly anyone's been in the bathrooms since we last did our checks but it's part of my job so I

can't do anything but agree. I need this job. I open the door and see the same three choices my girls just faced-- men's, women's and the cleaning supply closet. It's like a game show except I don't want to know what's behind any of the doors but I open up the cleaning supply closet. I take out my mop and bucket and push open the door to the men's room, running through a quick clean. Wipe down the mirror, the counter and the fixtures. Flush the urinals and throw in new pucks. Flush the toilets. Scrub the bowls. Wipe the pee off the seat. No one's shit on the seat or the floor so that's good. Mop myself out the bathroom. Put my supplies back in the closet. Walking back behind the counter to the sink, I wash my hands proper. Hot water with lots of soap. Lather. Really get underneath my nails. Sing my ABC's. Twice through just to make sure I've washed long enough. Lisa walks over to me, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Lenny, you know God-damn well what."

Out they come, all three of them and they walk up to my till. Lisa disappears into the bathroom so she can do her check of the ladies room. My classy queen smiles and orders three coffees to go. Not coffee, she changes her mind. I can't blame her. It's a hot night out tonight, the type of night that makes falling asleep difficult. She orders Iced Cappucinos. No, she changes her mind again. Just like a real woman but I wish right about now for her sake that she was more dick than chick so she could make a fucking choice and get outta here before Lisa comes back. After some hemming and hawing, she comes to it and I think, I pray it's her final one and I can get them on their way before

Lisa comes back out. Two regular Iced Cappucinos and one made with no-fat milk. She's trying to watch her figure, I guess. I hope she don't watch it too much cause girl's got it cracking where the others got it lacking. \$6.71 total. With a knowing smile, she reaches into her bridesmaid's dress and takes out a ten from her bra. I stare and she knows I'm staring. Really, man, woman or whatever the fuck ever. She is handsome. He is sexy. It is beautiful. Lord send me to hell in a hand basket for getting a boner over this beautiful creature. I don't give a fiddler's fart.

Then Explorer time. Ten-nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one... blast off. Boom! Luck runs out. Explosions. A nation gasps. Widows cry, babies too. We don't know what to do with ourselves except stare at the sky. Lisa comes back from the ladies room holding a bulging purse, plastic with purple sequins, a globe, a violet disco ball of a purse. Lisa would never buy a purse like this purse. Lisa uses big purses-- purses big enough to hold her knitting, a romance novel, her scrapbooking, a wallet fat with everything but money, her keys, her pills, hair brush, make-up and cell phone. I know. I've looked. She walks over, "Excuse me guys? One of yours?"

My queen blushes with the embarrassment of a Promise Ring wearing Penetecostal girl, and nods. For the first time, I notice her chin needs tweezing. "Sorry. Where is my head? That's mine. I just got some shots yesterday honey and, whooo, they do tend to make me a little spacey, if you catch my meaning." Her voice comforts me the way a voice does when someone sounds exactly like how you expect them to - the way she says "spacey" and skips over a catch phrase like "if you catch my meaning" makes me

want to laugh, grab her, dip her down and kiss her like I'm Clark Gable and she's Vivien Leigh, Marilyn Munroe and Lana Turner all rolled up into one delicious woman. All of a sudden, her voice drives me away from the donut shop and onto the street where I cruise around in my dad's Previa in that lull between night and morning. I see her on the street, walking, sexy, swinging her big girl hips. I pull up and she asks if I'm looking for company. I am. She takes me to this hotel which is run by a surly Lebanese man who smells of mint and take-out curry and who charges his rooms by the hour.

"That's fine," Lisa says, "But you aren't ladies so this shouldn't have been found in the ladies room now should it?" Her saying this kinda makes me smile 'cause she sounds like she's been playing Clue for an hour and it's suddenly dawned on her that it was Colonel Mustard in the arboretum with the candlestick. She doesn't take notice of me smiling or if she does, she doesn't say anything 'cause she's busy displaying her evidence.

My queen is no longer blushing out of embarrassment but anger. The Catholic School girl pipes up, "We didn't do anything wrong. We just went in there to fix our make-up."

"Listen guys, I understand," Lisa tells her, and it sounds like Lisa's jealous of them over something although what I can't quite make out. "But the ladies washroom is for ladies only. The men's is for men."



“We aren’t men,” my queen says suddenly, almost losing her regal composure at the thought of this utter disaster of a woman addressing her in such a disrespectful manner.

“Guys, I’m not going to argue. You’re obviously men. If you come back in here again, use the men’s bathroom. It’s simple. This is just one more thing your parents should’ve taught you. Boys washrooms are for boys. Girls are for girls. I don’t care what you do in your private life, okay? You’re private life is private but when you’re here, you’re going to have to act certain ways and that means using the proper facilities. Even if it is for make-up, okay?”

While this is happening, the assembly line sheep turn into sharks circling my three queens hoping that they’ll lash out at Lisa, make a threatening move, dump their coffee on her, throw a donut hole, sneeze in her general direction, do something, anything to Lisa just so they’ll be completely justified at beating my women to within an inch of their beautifully handsome lives. I can feel everybody getting itchy. Lisa turns to me, “Lenny, are these gentlemen waiting on anything else?”

“Yeah. They’re still waiting on their iced caps.” I say and start moving automatically, filling cups with ice, cream and shot of cappuccino, whirring, shaking, pouring, topping. I put the drinks in front of my Queen in a carrying tray. I’m still clutching her ten in my hand. I open up the cash register and my little computer screen reminds me to ask my Queen, “Excuse me ma’am - sir - are you interested in donating your change to the Boy Scouts of America? Help give a child the experience of a life time

this summer up at camp?" She nods and I put her change into the plastic collection box in front of my till and say "Thank you." I slide the tray with the drinks in it over to her. She lifts her eyes to meet mine. I can hear what she's asking me to do through her fake eyelashes. I can't. Or I don't. I'm not quite sure.

The queens, anxious to avoid a beating, make their way discreetly to the door and for some reason I feel the urge to say "Queers" and I do but under my breath so only Lisa can hear. I hope my queens don't hear me or see the way I look at them. They don't. Or they ignore me. They leave, linked arm in arm, and don't look back. Lisa turns to me, "What did you say, Lenny?"

"I called them queers."

"I heard you. That's not appropriate. At any rate, they're not gays."

"Well what are they?"

"They're men who think they're women."

I suddenly find myself repeating one of my great aunt's sayings to Lisa, "Well wish in one hand and pee in the other. See which gets full first." This saying was passed down from my Great Aunt Iris McKanen. I didn't see her much or talk to her a whole lot but I think that wherever she's ended up, she's gotta be proud that at least something of hers survived.

Lisa smiles at my effort. "I thought you were sweet on one of them, to tell you the honest truth."

"Not me."

“Oh no? You ain’t turning pink on me, are ya Lenny?”

“No. They make me sick. You mind if I excuse myself a moment?” I take off my apron when Lisa nods her approval. The customers, thankful that the guys in drag have left, return to their seats.

Lisa smiles and puts her hand on my shoulder. She’s never done that before.

“Lenny, you’ll understand one day,” she tells me. I nod but I’m not sure it’s true. It seems to me that lines are meant to be crossed, people challenged. I pull on my jacket and take off my hat. I have to. It’s company policy. The crisp tailoring and the warm colours of the customs fabric are designed to make me feel good about my job but I feel like shit. I really do think I’m going to be sick. “A line has to be drawn somewhere, Lenny,” Lisa says as I make a line for the bathroom. The door shuts behind me. Mens. Womens. Closet. I can feel the vomit coming. There’s not enough time to make it. Ripping open the closet, I blurb sweet and sweaty acid into my mop bucket. Wipe my mouth, “Oh sweet Jesus.”

I sit in the closet hugging my mop bucket, gasping, afraid to move, sore and repeatedly vomiting. My stomach empties itself but doesn’t stop clenching, twisting and purging. I keep going and going and even though I know nothing more is coming out, it sure as shit feels like my vital organs are tumbling one by one out of my mouth. Hurting, I breathe and try to calm myself. Finally the sickness passes. I grab the door handle and lift myself off the floor. Shutting the closet door, I leave my heart, lungs, stomach, liver and pancreas bobbing in a mop bucket, slowly disintegrating and being eaten away by

cleaning chemicals and stomach acid. It stinks. I never want to open that door again. I go into the men's bathroom and wash my face. I feel like something has just passed, something important but I don't know what. Doesn't matter. I come back out and see nothing interesting now. Just regulars pretending that they hadn't just heard me puking my guts out. Lisa, manning my till, smiles and asks if I'm all right. I nod and answer, "Fine," but my stomach reminds me of the truth. Nothing's fine and I know that nothing will ever be fine.

## SALINGER

The park fits ninety-seven RVs. That's nearly two hundred rowdy seniors and their pets - a menagerie of foofy dogs, too good for you cats with twinkly collars and at least one spoiled parakeet named Jake living in Florida with their owners - all of them hunkered down in the Sunshine State for the winter. There is no shortage of social activities they can engage in. Wednesday Nights are Luau Nights with a Jimmy Buffet cover band called Drunk in the Rain. Every morning, there are wind surfing lessons and every afternoon Puppy-and-Me Yoga classes with Sasha, a trainer from a near-by gym who is the niece of Cecil who lives in lot 34A. No one is ever in their RVs except to sleep so David Delaney, the son they left in Wisconsin with his newlywed wife, has to keep calling and calling Pat and Matt Delaney with the hopes of catching his parents in. David's been calling for the past two hours. No one is answering.

David tries watching television. He can't. *Nothing good on.* Redial. Nothing. He checks email. No one has sent anything to him. Redial. Nothing. He goes into the bathroom and weighs himself. *Almost 300.* He lifts his shirt and stares at his chest - every time he sees his nipples, he feels like a failure. In the kitchen, he roots through the pantry and finds a couple twinkies. He unwraps them, quickly eats them and stares down over his stomach at his lumberjack wool socks peeking over his Birkenschtocks. Redial. Someone finally answers. "—or the love of Christ, I have no idea what he wants..."

"Mom?"

"Oh, hi sweetie. How are you?"

David sits down on the couch Indian style, like they used to do in his Beavers and Cub Scout troops, “Not good.”

“Oh honey, I’m sorry to hear that. How is Carey?”

“That’s why I’m calling.”

There’s a noise in Florida’s background, “What?”

“I said that’s why I’m calling.”

“No. Not you, honey. Would you please shut your pie hole? I’m talking to our son,” her mom shouts away from the phone. “I’m sorry honey. It’s your father. He got this thing... what do you call it, honey bun?”

“A Wii.” his father’s voice explains.

“He got a Wii and everyone in the park’s been coming over. You should see all these old fogeys coming in and trying to play video games.” His dad says something again. “What was that? I can’t understand you. I’m going outside and hah! I’m taking the margaritas with me.” Noises of protest, “You’ve had enough.” More noises, “Oh all right. Just a top up but no more until the appetizers are ready. Let me know when they ding. They’re in the oven. Until then, why don’t you all drink some orange jui—”

“Mom?”

“One sec honey. Okay. Sorry about that. I’m outside now. What’s wrong sweetie pie? You sound sad. Are you depressed? Because if you are, Oprah said it could just be your testosterone levels dipping and there’s this herbal supplement you can take. It’s called acacia berry extract and oh my God, I can’t even believe it. I wish I had it when I

was pregnant with you. You got me so depressed at some points sweetie, I just wanted to—" his mom gives her son a grr, "Well, I was afraid to go outside. If only I had the acacia berry extract back then. And you should see my skin. Those bags under my eyes are gone. Ah, listen to me ramble. What can I do for you, sweetie?"

"It's Carey."

"What? What's wrong with Carey?"

"I don't know. She's been acting strange."

"Well sweetie, I don't know what to say. What has she been doing?"

"It's the way she talks. We'll be lying in bed—"

His mother caterwauls like a cat in heat.

"Mom, I'm serious."

"Honey, she's probably just going through a rough patch. We all have them.

When Daddy lost his job, I got so down in the dumps, there was absolutely nothing he could do to interest me. He tried everything and I mean everything."

"Mom, it's more than that. I need some help."

"Honey, I have to be honest with you. I'm a little high right now so I don't know how much help I can be now so how about you cut to the chase and tell me why you called. What's the problem? Is she hitting you?" she laughs, "She smacking my little boy around a little bit? I did that to your Dad once. We were painting I think, no, wall-papering, we were wall papering and he wasn't listening to me so I ripped down all the wall paper that he had just spent two hours putting up. He grabbed me by my

shoulders and slammed me against the wall. He raised his hand like he was going to slap me. Honey, I wish you could've seen it. You would have been so proud. I went ape shit on him. I honestly freaked out. I went up one side of him and down the other. He never saw that coming."

"Mom."

"Sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be swearing like that, should I? Not proper? Not very lady-like?"

"No, mom. It's not that. I don't care if you swear. I just need some help."

"Well what's your problem?"

"Mom, stop asking me that. I'm trying to tell you what my problem is."

"Okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Now what's the problem?" his mom bursts out laughing, "Honey. I'm sorry. It's just really hard to stop asking that question. You should try it."

"Mom, I think she's going to kill herself."

Florida is silent.

"Mom?"

"Honey, you need to call someone."

"I called you."

"I mean someone who knows what they're doing. Like a suicide prevention line. Let me talk to her. Girl-to-girl."

"Mom, she's not here."



“Is she in the garage? Tell me, God, you have a hybrid. ‘Cause I heard on Good Morning America that one of the benefits of going green is that you can’t kill yourself with carbon monoxide poisoning. No matter how hard you try, they just don’t kick out enough crap to do the trick.”

“She’s not doing it right now. At least, I don’t think she is.”

“Oh. Jesus Christ. Don’t do that to me. I need some orange juice,” his mom says as a latch clicks, “Matt. Put down your Wii. Your daughter-in-law is going to kill herself.”

“What?” his father says in the background.

“Your daughter-in-law is going to hang herself. Where is my orange juice?”

“Give me the phone, dear. Let me talk to him.”

“Fine. You talk to him. He’s your son. I can’t understand him anyway when he’s hysterical like this. Speaking in riddles. Who does he think I am? Dr. Phil?”

“Well give me the phone then.”

“Take it. You talk to him.”

“David?” his father says into the other end.

“Dad?” he answers.

“What’s this about Carey hanging herself?”

David rolls his eyes, “No, Dad. She’s not doing it right now and I never said she was going to hang herself. It’s just some things she’s said, okay? She’s really starting to make me nervous.”

“Like what? What did she say?”

“When did Mom start smoking pot?”

“David, it’s not what you think. You’re mom just likes to relax every now and then and we’re having a little party right now. I just got my Wii and Mitsy brought over her new labradoodle puppy and Mitsy is from California and you know what girls from California are like. They’re just... different somehow and your Mom is learning how to go with flow. I’ve never seen her like this. She really is blossoming into a whole new person. She seems so liberated.”

“Are you stoned too, Dad?”

“No. Just your mom. Well, not just your mom. A couple of them are but I’m not. I’m just drinking and not too much. A couple margaritas to take the edge off. A tiny taste but enough about me, back to Carey. How has she been behaving?”

“All right.”

“Listen sport, you didn’t call us, during prime time I might add, to tell us you’re worried that your wife is going to kill herself because her behaviour has been all right.”

“All right, all right. You remember six months ago her mother died?”

“Iris right?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. Lovely service. Go on.”

“We were lying in bed the other night and she just kept saying that she’s tired and she just kept repeating that. Over and over again. She’s tired. And when I asked her what

she's tired of, she said life. And she kept saying she no longer has any fear of death and I think she might kill herself. I think she might actually do it. She's not dealing with things very well. Her and her mother were very close. She was the youngest, a whoops but her mom loved her. She was the only daughter."

"Hold that thought. Maurice?"

"Matt," a man in the background says, "Look at the marble on that." Kissing noise, "T-Bones. Beautiful. I got them from Glen McConkey who knows this butcher down in Kissimmee who gets them straight from the farm so none of that slaughter house mark-up. Just look at the marble."

"Very nice. Make mine mid rare, please. Champ?"

"You haven't called me that since basic."

"I'm talking to my son, Maurice."

"Which one?"

"David."

"He the one who's married to that girl?"

"Yeah, who's thinking about doing herself in."

"Oh."

"I know."

David clears his throat, "Dad?"

"David, now listen to me very carefully."

"Yes dad."

“She needs your help. Now I do know a pastor up there. He’s very good with these sort of things.”

“I think she needs to see a psychiatrist, dad.”

“You didn’t let me finish. He’s one of those too. He’s got his counselling degree or something. Oh, what’s his name? The mind’s not what it once was, you know. Pat?” he calls his wife.

“Did she do it yet?” his mom answers.

“Honey, what’s that pastor’s name?”

“What pastor?”

“The one who’s also a doctor.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember him.”

“Dad?” David interjects.

“David, we’re talking okay? We’re trying to help you. Be a little patient.” He shushes his son before returning to speak with his wife, “You know the guy, right?”

“Yeah... I forget his name.”

“You know I think I have his card... one sec, David... here it is. David?”

“Yeah dad?”

“His name is Greg Bauer, Reverend Dr. Greg Bauer.”

“Oh really? We know him. Well, I do.”

“Apparently, he’s really good.”

David rolls his eyes and shakes his head in one motion, “When are you guys coming home? I really miss seeing you guys.”

“David, your mom and I just got here. We’re going to be down for the season. We got a lot of things going on and your mother’s fibro really calms down in the warm weather.”

“It’s probably just all the pot she’s smoking.”

“David,” his father warns.

“It’s true, Dad. I read this article on fibro and it said that marijuana is good medicine for it. Tell her that and have her talk to her doctor. She might be able to get a prescription and then you guys will be really popular with everyone.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that but I will certainly pass that little tidbit on. So are you going to call this guy?”

“The pastor?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve already talked with him. He’s kind of a big deal up here. Or thinks he is. He’s got his own radio show. And a blog.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“Oh, you know. I should commit my wife to prayer and meditation. Read the Bible. Lead my household. Be a man of God. Basically the Biblical equivalent of grow a set. He asked if I was saved. Asked if Carey was.”

“Now why would he ask something like that?”

“He’s a pastor, Dad. Whether or not you’re saved is basically all they’re really concerned about.”

“Well, what did you say?”

“I told him I guessed I was an agnostic.”

“David, have you learned nothing from me? You should’ve said yes, of course I’m saved. Now he’s going to think we didn’t raise you right.”

“Anyway Dad, he wasn’t much help and then he brought his wife in to talk to me about a woman’s needs and she was horrible. You should’ve seen this woman. You remember when you took Steve and me out to Hooters and you were teaching us how to pick out the women who had fake tits? This woman definitely had work done and actually, I think her husband did too but she definitely had a boob job and I’m pretty sure they’ve both had botox.”

“But what did he say after you said that?”

“Say what?”

“That you guessed you were an agnostic?”

“He said if I had to guess, I probably was.”

“God, David, I should’ve learned you how to deal with these people. They’re good for certain things but not all things. When they start talking religion, it’s generally best just to nod your head and agree with whatever you think they’re saying. If you don’t, then the conversation gets away from the issues you want help with and suddenly you’re knee deep in Jesus with no way out.”

“Well, Dad, why should I go see him in the first place then?”

“Because, David, if you use them right, you can get the same results as going to a psychiatrist but for a whole lot less. Generally for free. Well, what did he say about Carey?”

“He said that losing a parent is always difficult. Real profound stuff.”

“Did he think that Carey might kill herself?”

“He wasn’t sure.” David tells his father, “He said I should’ve brought my wife in with me. He wasn’t much help.”

“Well. Oh David, your mom wanted to know how your clothes are fitting.”

“They’re fitting fine.”

“Have you had to buy any new clothes?”

“No,” says David. “How’s the park this year?”

“Oh, you know. It’s pretty much the same but the council met during the summer and finally decided to get WiFi which is great. It was so difficult last year with just cable. After Wheel of Fortune, the bandwidth would drop to under five mbps. Oh, and they rescinded that retarded leash law which I think is good because everyone’s dogs are pretty much trained properly so there’s no need for it.”

“And the RV?”

“Oh David, it’s great. Best thing I ever bought.”

“Dad, I’m going to ask one more time. Can you and Mom please come home? I really feel like I need you around in my life right now.”

“No, sport,” says Matt. “You’ll be fine. Buck up.”

“Do you know when you’re going to be home?”

“Uhm, let me see. I think we’re going to swing through your neck of the woods on our way up to Canada to visit some friends up there around April. Maybe May. I’m not quite sure.”

“Ok, thanks,” David coughs away an urge to cry, “Daddy this call is costing quite a bit so I should probably get going.”

“Okay. Our steaks are almost ready anyway so, now’s as good a time as any. Well, try to have fun, David, okay? And tell Carey that if she kills herself, she’ll have me to deal with.” His father laughs.

“Okay,” David says, “I’ll give you a call next week. Let you know how things are going.”

“Next week isn’t good. We’re going camping in the Everglades. Your mom is crazy about finding something called the ghost orchid. Have you heard of it?”

“No.”

“Apparently makes pot look like ginger beer.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”

“You’re such a mid-western boy, aren’t you, David? You’re the buckle of the Bible Belt.”

“I don’t even know what that means. What are we talking about here, Dad?”



“You’re just so uptight. You need to open your mind a bit. Let your hair down. Maybe that’s what’s wrong with your wife.”

“So when are you coming back from your ghost orchid hunt?”

“Two weeks?”

“Fine. Two weeks then. Be careful.”

“Speaking of, where is Carey anyway?”

“Out tobogganing.”

“Tobogganing? Like, sledding?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Out at Suicide Hill.”

“That’s not the name, is it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s an awful name. Well, who’d she go with?”

“Just herself.”

“Well, that’s definitely not normal.”

“Dad.”

“What? I just think it’s a little strange for a grown woman in her thirties to go tobogganing by herself. It’s not normal.”

“I mean, all she does is go up and down the hill and drink hot chocolate. That’s it.”

“She doesn’t even drink coffee? Why not?”

“I don’t know. I guess she doesn’t like caffeine.”

“If there is anything that girl needs, it’s caffeine. It’s a mood elevator. It will chase away the blues. You should start finding ways to slip her some caffeine. See if that makes a difference. I’ll have mom send you some recipes. What’s your email address again?”

“You lost my email?”

“David, don’t take things so personally.”

“C and D Delaney, all one word, at computel dot net.”

“All right, David?”

“Yes?”

“We’ll do what we can to help you through this. I promise you. Okay?”

“Okay. I love you, dad.”

“I’ll talk to you later, guy.” He hangs up.

“How far down do you think it is?” asks seven year old Joey O’Rourke who’s out tobogganing with Big Brothers and Big Sisters. His Big Brother is named Vlad Popovich. Vlad has virtually no neck and wants to be a cop when he graduates university. He’s only volunteering with the Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America to show that he’s active in the community, that he cares. “How fast do you think is the fastest someone has ever went down this hill before us? And, do you think it’s possible for me to go faster than

that? And, if you do think it's possible for me to go faster then they did, what do you think I need to do to go faster, if it is possible?"

"Joey, I can't understand when you talk that fast but listen, I think your mom wants you to keep your face covered so why don't you pull up your scarf?"

Vlad stands at the top of Suicide sipping a coffee with the other Big Brothers and Big Sisters. Even though it's night, he's wearing aviator sun glasses. The Big Brothers and Big Sisters aren't the only ones out at Suicide Hill - there are parents out there with their kids, teen girls discreetly smoking while their boyfriends snowboard. Joey wanders away from Vlad to stand at the edge of Suicide staring down the hill with his red saucer toboggan dangling from his hand.

"I remember when I was a kid, we used to use garbage bags. That was great but they hurt your butt. I see these things now," says an old Big Brother beside Vlad, "All aerodynamic. These kids have it easy. I mean, I get it. They're poor and their parents don't care but come on. Look at them. Their parents are obviously rich enough and care enough about them to get them actual sleds. There isn't one kid out there on a garbage bag so how tough can they actually have it?"

"Yeah, isn't that something." Vlad nods and calls, "Joey?"

"Yeah?"

"We're heading out soon so why don't you get a couple more runs in?"

"I gotta pee."

"You can hold it until we get to McDonalds."

“We’re going to McDonald’s?”

“Yes. Go for a couple more runs and I’ll buy you a sundae.”

“Hot fudge?”

“Of course.”

Joey backs up from the edge of the hill, takes a deep breath, runs forward and launches himself head first down Suicide Hill. The snow shooshes, burning what little skin is exposed. Suicide is maybe only sixty feet down but it’s steep. His toboggan slows to a stop at the bottom of the hill where a grown woman is lying on her back underneath a tree making snow angels with her eyes closed and singing along with the music she’s listening to on her Ipod, “-ear the night calling and it whispers to me softly come and play...”

Joey knows this woman and nudges her with his foot, “Hi, Mrs. Delaney.”

The woman stops making her angel, takes out her ear buds and opens her eyes. She smiles up at the boy, “Hey, how’s it going, Joey?”

Joey snuffles and wipes rogue snot up the bridge of his nose, “Good. Are you here to go sledding?”

“I was giving it some serious thought,” says Mrs. Delaney, “So, what’s the score?”

“Huh?”

“The score, the skinny, the low down, the scuttlebutt, the rumbles, the mumbles, the jumbles, the jingles, the jangles. You know. What’s happening? What’s going on? What’s crack-a-lacking, big man?”

The boy kicks snow, “My daddy finally got a job.”

The woman ignores the snow in the face and lies back down, letting the snow melt onto her face. “That’s good. He’s been looking for a while, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“Did your daddy bring you here tonight? I was thinking about asking him if I could borrow his free weights.”

“No. He’s back at home. I’m here with my Big Brother.”

“I thought you only had a younger sister.”

“He’s not really my big brother.”

“Oh, okay. I gotchya.”

“Where’s Mr. Delaney?”

“Mr. Delaney?” the woman pulls her toque down closer to her head, “That’s a good question, Joey. He might be watching a hockey game but I doubt it. He doesn’t really like hockey. He might be out somewhere but I doubt it. He doesn’t really go out anymore. He’s likely on the internet but maybe he’s baking some cookies for me when I get home. But even if he is baking me cookies, there won’t be any left. He’ll probably have eaten them all before I even leave for home. Just gobbled them up. Like Cookie Monster. You know Cookie Monster?”

“Yes.” Joey says obviously, “I watched Sesame Street when I was a kid but I’m too old for that now.”

“Oh really? I still watch Sesame Street.”

“No you don’t.”

“I swear to God I do. And Teletubbies.”

“No you don’t. Grown-ups don’t watch that type of stuff.”

“Well, some do.”

“Does Mr. Delaney?”

“No, buddy, I’m afraid not.”

“You know Mrs. McGraw? She lives two houses down from us the opposite way of you. You know her?”

“Everyone in the neighbourhood knows Mrs. McGraw.”

“Now *she* eats a lot of cookies. Mommy says if she’s not careful, Mrs. McGraw’s going to lose a foot to diabetes or maybe even stroke out. Your husband’s fat but not fat like Mrs. McGraw fat. She’s huge. She looks like she has at least three babies in her tummy. She should go see a doctor. She can go to St. Agnatus downtown. They’re free. Well not really. I don’t know. I know that’s where we took my sister when she had to get her tonsils out and they only took her because we said she was Catholic. You remember?”

“I remember. I brought her ice cream.” Carey smiles, “Now that’s a good looking snow board there. How long you been carving the powder, boyo?”

“This isn’t a snow board, Mrs. Delaney. It’s called a UFO. It’s kinda like a sled but not really. They go way faster than a sled or even a snowboard.”

“Are you sure? It looks like a snow board under this moon but my grandmother always says that you could never trust a winter moon for light so why don’t you bring it closer?”

Joey steps forward and holds his UFO up for his neighbour to inspect, “See?”

“I sure do. I’m an idiot.”

The boy smiles, “No you’re not, Mrs. Delaney. Are you going tobogganing, Mrs. Delaney?”

“Like I said, it’s a strong possibility.”

“You’ll need a sled.”

“I have one. I’m lying on it.”

“That’s just a piece of plastic.”

“Maybe but I guarantee it’ll go faster then anything you got, kiddo.”

“Stevie Mulgrew said that you paid him to shovel your sidewalk.”

“He did? Stevie said that?”

Joey nods, “Yes.”

“Well, you know, shovelling sidewalks is boring. Stevie was there. You weren’t. It needed to be done, I didn’t want to do it. He needed the money. What was I going to say? Stevie, go away and if you come across Joey send him back here? Is that what you wanted me to say?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I didn’t. You know what I did though?”

“What?”

“I only paid him two bucks.”

“I wouldn’t have done it for anything less than five.”

“That’s cause you got the makings of a right proper hustler.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Means you know a good deal when you see one and if there aren’t any good deals, you make them. Am I right? Turn lemons into lemonade?”

“I guess. Yeah. I got next snow though?”

“You got next. My word.”

“And not for two?”

“Wouldn’t dream of trying to pull a fast one on you, player.”

“But you’d pull a fast one on Stevie Mulgrew?”

“I pull fast ones whenever I can,” says Carey as she pushes herself up, “but Joey?”

“Yeah?”

“Promise me that you’ll watch out for Stevie growing up, okay? He’s going to need it.”

“Okay. Mommy says Stevie’s a retard.”

“She did? What did you say?”

“I said that wasn’t a nice word.”



“What would you call Stevie?”

Joey shrugs, “Stevie.”

Carey smiles, “Joey, I’ll tell you what since you and I are such good friends, let’s go snowflake picking.”

“What?”

“Snowflake picking.” she says and pulls up her hood. She makes sure that her snow pants are over her boots and that her scarf is tucked in. She pulls her fingerless gloves down into warm, wooly mittens. She picks up her plastic sheet and puts her hand on Joey’s shoulder, “Let’s go. If we get enough, I’ll bake you a snowflake pie.”

The two start walking up Suicide and Joey stops. “You’re lying. You can’t make snowflakes into pie.”

“Really? Who says?”

“I do.”

“Okay. Whatever you say then. More for me. But you will help me, won’t you?”

“Help you with what?”

“Why with picking the snowflakes, of course.”

Joey digs his UFO into the snow and lifts up a load, “Here.”

Carey wretches, “Gross.”

“What? It’s snow, isn’t it?”

“Haven’t your parents taught you anything?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if they have, then you would know about snow. Not only has that snow been run over by hundreds of people but it’s also December snow.”

“So?”

“Well, December snow isn’t ripe. For good snow, you have to get February snow but the best snow pie is made from March snow.”

“But it doesn’t snow in March.”

“Sometimes it does and that’s what makes it so good. It’s rare. But, here we are, stuck in February like a couple of suckers.”

“Shitballs.”

Carey chokes back a smile, “You know what I like best about Stevie Mulgrew?”

“What?”

“He never, ever says bad words, at least in front of adults. You probably won’t believe this but there’s a group of boys that sometimes walk past my house on their way home from school and some of the words they say I’ve never even heard. I also think I saw a couple of them smoking once. But not Stevie Mulgrew. He always talks very nicely and would never even think about stealing cigarettes from his parents. I think that’s what I like best about him.”

Joey is silent.

“I can burp the alphabet,” he says finally.

“Now that’s talent. You’re going to go places, Joey and when you do, do me a favour and remember me,” says Carey stamping her feet in the snow. “Wow, it’s cold. Come on, Joey. Up to the top.”

They continue the trudge up the hill. Once at the top, they sit on their toboggans and look down.

“Where’s your Big Brother?”

Joey points to the tree line where Vlad is hitting on some highschool girls.

“There.”

“Really? That’s him.”

“Yup. He’s going to be a cop when he graduates.”

“He’s sure acting like one.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothing. So, are you ready?”

“Are you sure this will work?”

“Joey. Please okay? You’re talking to the Lady. I’ve been baking snowflake pies since before you were even born and I have to tell you, February is a great time of year to go snow flake picking.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s ok. It’s understandable. It’s a very delicate and secretive art that can only be known to six people at a time. But right now, there are five of us and I can name them all.”

“Oh yeah? Who are they?”

“That’s simple - me and I was taught by a Sherpa named Orne...”

“What’s a Sherpa?”

Carey shushes Joey, “Just listen. So there’s me and Orne. Orne was taught by the Emperor of Russia who was taught by the Last Pirate in Singapore.”

“What’s his name?”

“Whose name?”

“The pirate.”

“Who said it was a he? It just so happened it was a girl pirate.”

“There’s no such thing as a girl pirate.”

“Oh yes, there are. Her name is the Dread Pirate Lindy. Now finally, the Dread Pirate Lindy learned the fine art of snowflake picking from a Menhune named Alekoko and she had to trade all of her treasure just for the opportunity to learn how to bake snowflake pies. She’s now very poor and very old but has gotten extraordinarily fat from eating snowflake pies every single day for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“What’s a Menhune?”

“You don’t know who the Menhune are? What are they teaching you kids in school?”

“The state capitals right now.”

Carey raspberries, “Boring. The Menhunes are a group of people who live deep in the forests of Hawaii and live solely on a diet of fried fish and bananas.”

“And they discovered how to pick snowflakes and how to bake them into pies?”

“Joey, don’t be silly. Of course not. There’s no snow in Hawaii to pick, is there?

It’s too hot.”

“But then how did th—”

“Joey, I don’t have all the answers but I only said one Menehune knew it. Only Alekoko knew how to snowflake pick.”

“But where did he learn it from?”

“Beats me but the person who taught Alekoko recently died under some very strange circumstances and we’re now looking for a sixth person to replace him. As the last person to learn, it’s my responsibility to choose that person. Now, do you, Joey O’Rourke, want to be that sixth person?”

“Yes.” The boys grins.

“All right, Mr. Joey, here’s what you do. Before we go down the hill, we have to take off our hats. When we go down the hill, you have to hold open your hat like a windsock.”

“A windsock? Now I know you made that one up.”

Carey grins, “Like a net then. You understand what I mean?”

Joey shakes his head.

“When we get to the bottom of the hill, look in your hat and it’ll be full of snowflakes, ripe ones. I’ll take them home with me, bake the pie and drop by when your mommy’s home and we can all have a big slice of snowflake pie.”

“Will you tell her I helped?”

“Of course. If I didn’t that’d be lying. Now, when you eat regular pie, what do you put on it?”

“Ice cream usually.”

“Usually?”

“Sometimes my daddy puts cheddar cheese on his.”

“Really? That’s odd. But that doesn’t matter. You don’t put either on snowflake pie. You put on hot fudge.”

“That sounds awesome.”

“Yes, it does.” Carey sits down on her sled, “Are you ready?”

“No,” Joey sits down on his UFO, “It’s really far down. I’m scared.”

“Scared? Ignore it. Just close your eyes, take a deep breath and go.” Carey says, “Just go.” She reaches with her foot and nudges the UFO towards the edge. It tips over and sends Joey rushing down the hill screaming and laughing. Carey follows. The slope levels off and they slow down.

Joey looks in his hat, “I got some!”

“Some what?”

“Some snowflakes.”

“Taste them.”

Joey turns his hat inside out and tastes some of the flakes. “Hmmm...”

“What?”

“They do taste better in February.”

“I told you. How many did you get?”

“Only twenty.”

“What do you mean only twenty? Twenty’s great. I can make at least two pies with that amount of snow.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Snow expands when you cook it.”

“I didn’t know that.”

Carey leans over, grabs Joey’s face and kisses him on the forehead.

“Hey!” Joey wipes of the kiss.

“I gotta go sweetie. Gimme your snow and I’ll talk it home.”

“No.”

“Why not? Don’t you want some pie?”

“Sorry,” he says and hands over his hat. Carey scoops out the snow and puts it in her pocket.

From up the hill in the darkness, Vlad’s voice calls his Little Brother, “It’s time for McDonald’s. Let’s go.”

“I gotta go, Mrs. Delaney,” says Joey. “When will you come by with the pie?”

“Next week.”

“Okay.”

“Good night, Joey.”

“Good night.” the boy says and runs up the darkness of the hill.

Carey puts her hands in the pockets of her thrift store ski jacket as she walks to her car. The parking lot has been ploughed and salted. She walks past a woman with highlights in her hair who’s wearing real pretty lipstick that doesn’t leaves any marks when she sips from her expensive coffee. The woman looks at her.

Carey has known women like this all her life. Women who got pregnant early. Not teenaged mom pregnant but early twenties pregnant. Women who constantly stare at the bellies of other women until they find a pregnant one and then they become suddenly very free with re-telling the horror stories of their own pregnancies. Carey wants to go over and tell this woman to stop staring at her but she doesn’t. She gets in her car and drives home. She walks into her house to find her husband at the computer. He looks away from the screen and up at her, “Hey babe.”

“Hi.”

“How was tobogganning?”

“Okay.”

“How are you?”

“I’m okay and yourself?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m going to bed.”



“Night.”

“Night.”

She walks upstairs and down the hall where she lets herself into their bedroom.

The room smells of dirty laundry.

She looks over at the indent of her husband on the mattress. She pulls her pajamas on and slides her feet under the covers. Her bed is cool. She puts a pillow in between her legs, hugs a body pillow, shuts her eyes and forces herself asleep.

## KILLING THE AUTHOR

### INTRODUCTION

Just over a year ago, it seemed like every month, someone in my family died. The first to go was an aunt with whom I was close. The second to die was a woman who was akin to a godmother. Then another aunt, an uncle and a friend. It went on and on like this for about six months. In six months, I was a pall bearer six times. These experiences formed the beginning of this project. I wrote a story using Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" as my starting point to tell a story about two pall bearers at a family funeral. I then wrote other stories where I found myself personally and thematically examining death from a variety of characters' perspectives using different authors in the same way that I used Hemingway. The term that I found most helpful to describe what I was doing was "redaction," because it encompasses "the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material... in the composition of new material or the creation of new forms" (Perrin 1). The "traditional material" that I was redacting was the 20<sup>th</sup>-century canon of American short stories. I began to write around a meta-narrative of a family, the McKanens, dealing with the death of their matriarch, Iris McKanen. As soon as I constructed this meta-narrative, I realized that I had begun to redact Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* which deals with the death of a matriarch told through the eyes of her surviving family, as well as the dead woman herself in one chapter. The term redaction began to hum even more as I realized that not only was I collecting, arranging, editing and modifying the existing material but I was also using those redacted works in ways that use

the formal conventions of the short story and the formal conventions of the novel to compose a hybrid genre.

As I redacted authors from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I realized that not only thematically was I examining death but I was also “killing the author.” I was taking “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” away from “Hemingway,” for instance. The project further developed from examining canonical stories about death to trying to bring about the death of the canon. By “death of the canon”, I do not mean the dissolution of the canon. By bringing about the death of the canon, I mean bringing about the death of the exclusionary power the canon has to determine who and what type of people will and will not be read. I aim to accomplish “death of the canon” by killing the author. In fact, I contend that the “death of the author” is synonymous with the “death of the canon” because the process of canonization depends upon dominant notions of authorship and its relation to history, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality and gender.

When we think of texts within the canon, we think of those texts in terms of authorship. Barthes attached the notion of divinity to notions of author and created the “Author-God” (1257) noting that attaching an Author to a text attaches “a final signified” (1257) to a text which releases “a single theological meaning” (1257). We might more appropriately say epistemological meaning. The Author-God, by being the final signified, attaches one ultimate way of knowing a text. The text is merely used as justification for the Author-God’s place within the text. Would *The Merchant of Venice* be canonical had Shakespeare not wrote it? Texts do not occupy the canon as disembodied entities. They

are anchored to notions of authorship. Even in cases where the authorship of a text is in dispute such as *Henry VIII* or completely unknown as is the case with *The Arden of Faversham*, a play written during Shakespeare's time, the author is still the focus.

Questions surrounding authorship still place the author, albeit an unknown or disputed author, in a position of primary importance. Suppose one were to prove that Shakespeare was indeed not the author of *Henry VIII* - to do so would kill the generally established and accepted Author-God of that text. In which case, critics would be in a frenzy trying to anchor another Author-God to that text because to prove that Shakespeare is not the author is to ask the question, well who is? Conversely, if one were to discover the author of *The Arden of Faversham*, one would find the Author-God and with that information be able to attach ultimate epistemological meaning to the text. Whether known, disputed or unknown, authors anchor texts to the canon by providing the final signified. This is why upon examination Barbara Pace found that five different anthologies from five different publishers include a sampling of different pieces by the same 20<sup>th</sup> century authors (33). Textual and critical authority begins with the author.

In "The Death of the Author" (1968) Roland Barthes notes that the author, as a symbolic figure, emerged during the Middle Ages and is still so entrenched in the consciousness of those who study literature, that to disentangle the Author from the work is almost impossible (Barthes 1256) - "Baudelaire's oeuvre is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's is his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice" (Barthes 1256). Turning to the twentieth century, critical writing about its canon posits that Hughes's oeuvre is his

race, Oates her gender, Hemingway his nihilism, Updike his salaciousness, and Salinger his isolation. But ultimately, I return to Barthes's assertion that the imposition of an "Author-God" onto literature limits our potential understanding of literature by furnishing it with a final signified (1257) and that much like the relationship between the Christian God and the Biblical canon, the literary canon and the "Author-God" presents readers with an institutionalized collection of "the best that is known and thought" (Corse and Griffin 174). The term redaction shares a historical link with canonization. Redaction is used in the work of New Testament scholar Norman Perrin to illustrate the Mark-Q hypothesis. The theory is that in the composition of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Luke/Acts and Mark), Mark and an unknown "Q" document were used as source materials for the composition of the other two which are Matthew and Luke/Acts. Redaction was used to construct notions of God using narrative. In this thesis the term redaction endeavours to creatively examine and disassociate the Author-God from narrative for the purpose of undermining the different criteria initially used for canonical inclusion by altering the original narrative while maintaining explicit links to the original text. Throughout the rest of the essay, I will explain how I accomplished this for each piece. I will begin with Langston Hughes's "Feet Live Their Own Life," followed by Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place". Hemingway will be followed by Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and John Updike's "A&P." J.D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" will be the last

individual piece before I examine the collected works as a redaction of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

### HUGHES REDACTION

Working with Hughes's "Feet Live Their Own Life" was the most difficult redaction to accomplish. I found myself creatively hitting the same wall that scholarship on Hughes's work continually hits which "correlates Hughes's aesthetic and poetic concerns with his racial identity" (Jones 1145). There was initially a great deal of hesitation on my part when redacting Hughes's work because his work has been so significantly codified by critics as a "racially and culturally symbolic presence in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature" (Jones 1145) that to redact his work felt like cultural appropriation on my part. The question that weighed most significantly on me as a writer was whether or not to make my protagonist black. I went back and forth on this decision. On one hand, Langston Hughes is one of the only black writers included in the 20<sup>th</sup> century canon as evidenced by his presence within anthologies of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Barbara Page's 1992 study "The Textbook Canon: Genre, Gender, and Race in US Literature Anthologies" surveyed "five commonly used US literature anthologies" from five major US publishers (Harcourt, Scott Foresman, Prentice-Hall, Holt, and McDougal Littell) and found that out of "98 writers represented," Hughes was one of only 10 black writers who were consistently represented across the five anthologies (33). To redact Hughes put me in the position of redacting an author that has been constructed by the

canon or perhaps for the canon as an iconic African American presence within 20<sup>th</sup> Century American literature.

Matthew Arnold asserts that the canon is composed of “the best that is known and thought” (Corse and Griffin 174). If Arnold’s assertion is true, then the canon should consist of a wide range of voices from an equally diverse range of backgrounds, but the “canon is not a chorus of multicultural voices” (Pace 33). The canon has long excluded those who are different from membership and those that are different have had to fight for recognition for inclusion in the canon. Among the list of minority groups who fought for recognition within the American canon, “African American literature has perhaps been the most successful minority literature, both at entering the mainstream canon through inclusion in college syllabi and at legitimating a separate canon with an accompanying body of critical commentary” (Corse and Griffin 175-176). With this in mind, my redaction of Hughes’s work progressed slowly. Thoughts about my own subject position and identity were never far from my mind. I asked myself numerous questions. Is it morally/ethically responsible for me to take this iconic African American presence within the canon and redact him? To do so brought to mind fellow Canadians Grey Owl and W. P. Kinsella. Other questions abounded such as: Are writers constrained to representing only their immediate culture? Am I forever restricted to write about middle-class white Canadians because that’s what I am? Whenever I asked myself these questions, I kept returning to this point - at some time a decision was made to include Langston Hughes within the canon and since that point of inclusion, Hughes’s presence has been reinforced

through critical study, through the use of anthologies and through the teaching of his work on campuses around the world. Whether Hughes's intention was to become an iconic black writer or not is not a relevant question for this thesis. The canon and the mechanisms of canonical reinforcement have codified Hughes as a "racially and culturally symbolic presence in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature" (Jones 1145). Therefore since my thesis deals with the canon, the logic would demand that my redaction of Hughes has to deal with race because that is how the canon deals with Hughes and but I do not use Hughes as a way to deal with race. Only once do I explicitly reference the race of the character who is the protagonist in my Hughes redaction and even then not in Hughes's story. The reader is able to recognize the protagonist as a character in the Oates redaction by his clothing description (nursing scrubs) and by the description of this character's mother. I decided to mention the race of the protagonist in another story because to ignore race would be to ignore one of the primary ways in which Hughes is constructed by the canon and yet to make Hughes's redaction simply about race would do nothing to alter the canonical preconceptions of Hughes's body of work. Instead of race, I attempt to address how people know and define others.

In Hughes's story, the character Simple asserts that one can significantly know another human being by examining their outward appearance: "If you want to know about my life... look at my feet and see if you can tell how long I been standing on them" (Hughes 1203). For Simple, looking at his feet should be enough and in case it's not, Simple is more than happy to explain what his feet say about his life. When Simple's feet



or his explanation of his feet prove inadequate for the narrator, the narrator begins to ask questions about his personal life that have nothing to do with Simple's feet or with what Simple says his feet mean. The questions the narrator asks have to do with the women in Simple's life, in particular Simple's great-great-great grandma. Even though Simple will talk about himself, his feet and women, Simple does not like women to talk too much especially about him (Hughes 1204) or to be questioned about the women in his life. When the narrator questions Simple about how his identity might be constructed via the women in his life, Simple ends the conversation by saying "I don't play dozens that far back" (Hughes 1205) and disappears into the bar with his mistress.

In my redaction, Mel asserts that he doesn't know what to look for anymore when trying to find out about someone. Mel also believes that even though there is more to a person than what their outward appearance communicates, he is unsure of how or unwilling to communicate what is beneath the outward construction of his identity. Mel resigns himself to the belief that the superficialities of one's life are all that make one's identity even if those superficialities are misleading. In the case of Mel, his superficial identity is derived from his work. When his self-construction is challenged by the narrator, Mel ends the conversation. Both Simple and Mel construct their identities via outward markers (feet or jobs), both are challenged by the narrators to critically examine how they've constructed their identities and both, unwilling to accept the narrator's challenge, end the conversation.

OATES REDACTION

My redaction of Joyce Carol Oates's "Where are you going, Where have you been?" also presented some significant challenges particularly when it came to working with the socio-political context of Oates's story and the general thematic concerns of Oates fiction which is most always about a young woman who wanders into new territory where she meets a man who exploits her in some way (Smiley 38). Simply reiterating that women "are powerless in a sexually violent world" (Smiley 38) play directly into the established reading of Oates which canonizes her as a feminist because of her "realistic portrayal of women in America" (Smiley 39). In the same way that Hughes is made to be canonically representative of black culture with a predominantly white America, Oates is made to be canonically representative of white women in a predominantly patriarchal America. In many ways I went through the same process that I went through when redacting Hughes. Oates is symbolically representative of an oppressed gender and potentially redacting her story felt like an act of exploitative violence. Once again, I had to deal with how the canon had constructed Oates which is as a writer who writes about women who are exploited by a patriarchal society.

Published in 1966 in the midst of the Cold War, a war that can be described as a war of "paradox, uncertainty, or paranoia" (Cruise 100), Oates's short story begins as a *bildungsroman* in that the main narrative deals with the maturation of a young person into adulthood. But in James Cruise's article "'Where Are You Going?, Where Have You Been?' and Cold War Hermeneutics", the socio-political context of the story is explored and the story changes from a tale of initiation into a "literary child of the 1960's, a scion

of Cold War politics” (Cruise 95), a story fraught with the same paradox, uncertainty and paranoia that Cruise says Americans were feeling when Oates was writing her story. If Cruise is correct in asserting that this story is emblematic of an American way of knowing and understanding the world during the Cold War, this could additionally explain the story’s place within the canon and anthologies. When combining the socio-political context of the story with the traditional themes associated with Oates, we see a traditional Oates story happening where a woman wandering into new territory is victimized by a man. The new territory that Connie wanders into is not only adulthood but a heavily politicized version of adulthood with strict cultural expectations in terms of gender. The Cold War culture Connie lives in is one of dichotomies - good versus evil, communist versus democratic, right versus wrong, lady versus tramp. Connie chooses poorly according to her culture’s preferred form of femininity and she is punished by Arnold Friend who was based on American serial killer Charles Schmid. In my redaction, I maintain this correspondence by basing my antagonist on the 2007 Virginia Tech killer Seung-Hui Cho. In my redaction, the journey towards adulthood is maintained. What has changed in my redaction is the political climate that my protagonist experiences her journey toward adulthood in. The Cold War climate with its dichotomous expectations for feminine behaviour punishes Connie for choosing poorly and rejecting the ideal notions of femininity offered to her by her family.

The Cold War climate and years (1947-1989) and the contemporary political climate share some similarities. America’s enemies remain the same - China, communists

from South America and Muslims. America still lives under the threat of a vague and ultimately unknowable enemy that threatens not only lives but values. Countries are economically sanctioned and punished for standing in the way of “Freedom”, “Democracy” and/or “Liberty”. But despite the similarities that exist between the contemporary political climate and the political climate of the Cold War, there remains one significant difference. That difference is that people are now culturally able to resist the call to war and not be cut off from community, thanks to those who during Connie’s time of the Vietnam War were cut off from community and culture because of their opposition to US Foreign policy. As an homage both to the original story and the counter-culture which developed as a response to the dominant culture, I have included numerous references to Bob Dylan. I refer both to an iconic image of Bob Dylan taken from the cover of his album *Blonde on Blonde* and a phrase taken from Bob Dylan’s album *Time out of mind* when describing the poster of a “shadowy, wind swept old man staring at something out of frame, out of time.”

Connie is, as Cruise argues, a “child of Cold War containment.. No one, it seems, has taught her how to fend for herself, just as she has never learned to live for herself... Womanhood is not conscious determination but is an unformed notion to act upon” (Cruise 104.) Just as Connie is a child of her time, so too is Tanya a child of hers but the times they are a changin’. Tanya knows how to fend for herself. She determines her own destiny when faced with a world that seeks to control her. She is able to exercise agency within both the domestic and public spheres but like any rogue nation or dissenting voice

from within the dominant culture, she is not safe from retribution. She is just able to weigh the cost of actions that she chooses to take and is willing to accept the consequences for those actions.

### HEMINGWAY REDACTION

Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" was the first redaction I wrote. The story is characterized by many critics as the creative articulation of Hemingway's renunciation of Catholicism (Bluefarb 5) and embrace of nihilism. The Catholic connections abound in the story. The narrative deals with two waiters talking about an old deaf patron who had tried to commit suicide (a mortal sin in Catholicism or a sin for which there is no forgiveness offered). The older waiter shows some identification with the patron while the younger waiter rejects the old man and even tries to get rid of him. The old deaf patron is expelled from the "clean, well-lighted place" to wander the dark and lonely places of the world (the bodegas which are implied to be the antithesis of the clean, well-lighted place) by himself. After the old patron's expulsion from the clean, well-lighted place, the waiter who identifies with the old man ends up praying to nothing. If *nothing* is substituted for *nada* his prayer is: "our nothing who art in nothing nothing be the name thy kingdom nothing thy will be nothing in nothing as it is in nothing" (Hemingway 32). The rejection of Catholicism and embrace of nothingness complete, the patron returns home to an empty bed in which he will lie until morning, convinced that he has insomnia. The last line of the story is "Many must have it" (Hemingway 33), "it" being insomnia. The older barman takes solace in knowing that

he's not alone in his isolation and that there are other people out there who will lie in bed awake nights waiting for morning and praying to nothing - nihilism. As with most Hemingway stories, masculinity and masculinity in crisis are central features (Fantina 290).

In my redaction the two waiters are two pallbearers in a funeral procession and the drunken patron is a family outcast. Also the masculinity of my two characters is not in crisis but instead there is a positive sense of masculinity which seeks communal and familial identification. One of the more curious elements of Hemingway's original story is the *nada* section which is frequently understood as nonsensical and ironic (Bennett 70). In an overt nod to the *nada* section, I have altered "nada" to "yadda". Instead of being nonsensical and yet ironic, it is used to communicate a mutual understanding of emotional support. Instead *nada*, which means nothing and is meant to emphasize the nihilistic theme, *yadda* means something. *Yadda* means family. *Yadda* means whatever you need, you've got. *Yadda* in my redaction is a way of articulating the bond that exists between these two characters, an unspoken reassurance that one will always be there for the other. When a character is on the verge of being too emotionally vulnerable, the opposite character will give some variation of *yadda* as a way to offer emotional support. Finally, the similarities between the two stories are that they both deal with suicide, social ostracization from the point of view of those doing the ostracizing and both stories are dialogue driven.

The critical literature surrounding Hemingway usually has to do with men on the edge of violence and destruction but out of this violence and destruction the man usually manages to salvage something (Warren 1-2). Through the situation of the narrative, the main character comes to stand for some sort of masculine ideal, a man of principle, a man's man who is principled and stands in stark contrast to the randomly hedonistic, impulse drives of the unprincipled (Warren 2). That's not to say that the Hemingway male is not hedonistic or impulse-driven. They are just impulse-driven principled hedonists. This ideology of manhood is the criteria that is used for Hemingway's inclusion in the canon. This redaction aims to subvert this specific conception of masculinity. My main character stands in stark contrast to the traditional Hemingway male. The main character in my redaction only manages to salvage meaning when he forsakes violence and destruction and seeks constructive relationships.

#### UPDIKE REDACTION

Updike's "A&P" deals with a young man named Sammy who works at a grocery store and who witnesses three beautiful young girls coming in. The young girls are wearing swim suits and are eventually asked to leave by the manager for being dressed indecently. The manager is critically constructed as the establishment, Church, God, parents, authority, etc (Porter 1157). The cashier's attraction to the three young girls leads him to stand up for the girls and ultimately he walks off his job. Sammy's decision to quit is seen by critics as "both an affirmation of the girls' decency and a rejection of the A & P and the misplaced values for which it stands" (Porter 1157). In my redaction, A & P has

become Dunkin' Donuts. The young beautiful girls are transsexual prostitutes. The transsexual prostitutes are asked to leave after going into the women's bathroom. But my cashier, when faced with the same decision that Sammy faced, is unable to quit and show his affirmation. Instead, my cashier affirms the values of the establishment, but at a personal cost: he ends getting sick in the closet. While Updike's Sammy and my Lenny identify with the girls' transgressive behaviour, only Sammy is able to use the identification to publicly affirm that the girls were treated unfairly. The cashier Lenny in my redaction is unable to publicly affirm his identification. In fact, he has to deny the attraction he feels towards the transsexuals. Both Sammy and my cashier's affirmation come from placing the girls/transsexuals as objects to be desired. Sammy, living in a culture which encourages heterosexual objectification, is able to use the cultural affirmation to fuel his public identification. The only thing Sammy loses is his job in the story. The risk is low. My cashier lives in a culture which discourages any expression of desire that does not fall under the heterosexual norm. So while my cashier identifies with the transsexual prostitutes as objects of desire, he is unable to translate that desire into action, thereby affirming, instead, the dominant cultural assumptions of propriety.

This redaction stands in stark contrast to the others in this thesis in that it displays a lack of positivity and affirmation. Updike criticism frequently focuses on the author's use of sex as a means to critique institutions such as marriage, family or church (Heddendorf 112). In "A&P," critics read the sexual objectification of the girls as a means to subvert and ultimately reject authority (Porter 1157). This redaction maintains the



critical connection between Updike's use of sex and institutional critique but subverts it by altering the desire from heterosexual desire to queer desire for the purpose of exploring the cultural repression/prohibitions placed upon queer individuals within contemporary North America. I do believe that gender and race relations are progressing positively within the United States. The majority of Americans from both ends of the political dichotomy are committed to preserving equality despite a person's gender or race. But this is not so when it comes to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals. The issue of equal rights for the GLBT community is still a polarizing issue across the United States of America. This redaction uses the connection drawn by critics between Updike and sex as a means to challenge institutional authority to note that while in some ways "the times they are a-changing," in other ways America remains mired in a past which places collective cultural/social/religious values above the expression of individual freedom which is supposedly the primary and most important of all American values. This redaction hopefully expresses this tension and reminds readers that until we are all equal, none of us are equal.

#### SALINGER REDACTION

J. D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" tells the story of Seymour Glass and his suicide. Many of Salinger's works exist within a shared fictional universe. "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is the first story in the Glass family mythology. Seymour's suicide is a watershed moment for the family. Seymour becomes an unseen presence, a specter whose influence ripples throughout the rest of the Glass stories (Bryan 226). The

story is traditionally divided by critics into two sections (Bryan 226). The first deals with Seymour's wife preening herself in their hotel while talking long distance to her mother (Bryan 228). The second recounts Seymour's interactions with a young girl named Sybil as he lies on a beach having been recently discharged from a mental institution. I would add a third section to this which is the scene in which Seymour sits on the bed with his wife and commits suicide by firing a pistol through his right temple. Despite the critical debate surrounding the specific events in the narrative which led to the suicide, there is a consensus among critics that the cause of Seymour's suicide seems to have its psychological roots in the traditional thematic concerns of Salinger - youth versus adult, loss of innocence, sexual frustration/confusion.

In my redaction, I have altered the genders of everyone in the story - Seymour is Carey, Seymour's wife is David, Carey's husband and the little girl Sybil becomes a little boy named Joey. I did not experience any of the trepidation in the gender swapping while redacting Salinger's, that I experienced during Oates's redaction because at the same time as I inverted the genders in the Salinger story, I was inverting the realms that male and female were placed in by Salinger. In Salinger's story, the woman is in the private sphere of the hotel room while the male is out in public. In the redaction, the male is portrayed within the private sphere and the female is portrayed within the public sphere. Salinger's original story takes place in Florida in the summer while my redaction takes place primarily in Wisconsin during the winter. In my redaction, the first section shows David, the husband, at home talking to his parents who are wintering in Florida. David is

concerned that his wife might kill herself and his parents are treating the situation flippantly. The second section of the story finds Carey tobogganing while having a conversation with Joey. I removed Salinger's fetishization of youth and the mourning of lost innocence while trying to maintain the tone of Seymour's interactions with Sybil in the dialogue between Carey and Joey. Once I removed traditional thematic concerns associated with Salinger by critics, I found that the tone of the redaction took on a more altruistic/maternal tone. The imposition of these thematic concerns onto an author helps critics attach a text with a "a final signified" (Barthes 1257) which helps to explain the inexplicable act of Seymour and once a text is explained, a critic "has won" (1257). The final signified that is imposed by critics to explain Seymour's suicide is his loss of innocence and inability to live in a world without innocence.

I found when writing that Carey is far less "antagonistic" (Bryan 228) than Seymour and much more akin to Muriel (Bryan 228). Carey's relationship with Joey is maternal whereas Seymour's relationship with Sybil has been read by critics as inappropriate (229). I do include references to *bananafish* in the story which revolves around the Menhuna. At its core, Salinger's story shows a young man in crisis who, finding himself unable to resolve the crisis, turns to suicide. As I wrote my way through my redaction, I found that I was writing with more of the relationship between Carey and David in mind. My story is less about an individual in crisis and more about a relationship in crisis. This redaction includes an examination of relationship in crisis because individualism and threats to individualism are predominant concerns in 20<sup>th</sup>

century America. The individual crisis seems to be at the heart of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American short story and in a broader way, is a core American value which naturally would be reflected in its literature. The term “threat to individual liberty” is used by both ends of the American political spectrum to justify their social and military policies. To change the individual crisis into a relational crisis is to undermine the American value of individualism.

### FAULKNER REDACTION

When examined as a unit or single narrative or novel, this collection of redactions is meant to be a redaction of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*.

The first characteristic that both works have in common has to do with content. Both this thesis and Faulkner’s novel revolve around a family dealing with the death of a matriarch. Both novels are told from differing individuals’ points of view. Faulkner’s novel contains fifteen different narrative points of view told across fifty nine chapters. This thesis contains five different narrative points of view, told across five chapters in the style of five different American writers. As a result of using different narrative points of view, both this thesis and *As I Lay Dying* are examples of what Stephen M. Ross calls the “polyphonic novel” (Ross 300), a novel where there are multiple voices. Ross in his article discusses the mimetic elements of voice in great detail. As we as readers progress through Faulkner’s novel “we hear the dialect of poor white Mississippi farmers, talk by small town shopkeepers, tense and fast paced narration” (Ross 300). The variety of voice in *As I Lay Dying* is mimicked in this thesis. When progressing through this thesis there

are a variety of differing voices represented: a fourteen-year-old video game addict, a seventeen-year-old donut maker from the Southern United States, two twenty--somethings, and a married couple in their early thirties. Each chapter of *As I Lay Dying* and each section of this thesis is distinguished by various mimetic voices which are “the vehicles of human utterance and expressions possessed by fictional characters and heard by other characters” (Ross 301). Both works are mimetic in that they both seek to represent something. *As I Lay Dying* seeks to represent Southern dialect. This thesis seeks to represent via voice mimicry the 20<sup>th</sup> Century American short story canon, in order to undermine the very criteria that critics canonized these authors for in the first place. Ross brings up an interesting point when he notes that human utterances in *As I Lay Dying* are “heard by other characters.” In *As I Lay Dying* the most idiomatic example of dialect illustrates this point clearly.

In *As I Lay Dying* one of the most Southern portions of dialect comes from Anse Bundren but in a chapter narrated by Doc Peabody (Ross 302). Ross is right to note that Anse sounds the most country when being heard by a townie (Ross 302) and that in other portions of the novel when Anse speaks with people from the country visual conventions and markers of idiomatic speech disappear altogether as it is a truism among modern linguists that it’s always someone else somewhere else whose voice carries a distinct *accent*, it is never one’s own voice, because each of us thinks we are speaking the most natural English there is. In my thesis, the most idiomatic portion of voice is from Lenny the donut maker. But unlike Anse in *As I Lay Dying*, Lenny’s dialogue is unfiltered. That

is, unfiltered through another character. Ross notes that Faulkner uses the polyphonic and mimetic elements to represent aspects of each individual character's consciousness - be it their dreams, their desires, their fears, their biases, their sense of superiority, etc. The mimetic elements in this thesis do not seek to be a representation of a character's geopolitical location via dialect but instead a polyphonic and mimetic portrayal of 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture; that being said Ross's point is applicable. In the same way that Anse's dialect is filtered through the ears of a townie, this thesis is filtered through critical conceptions of its authors, including me.

## CONCLUSION

In my thesis, I have attempted to deconstruct America's representation of itself using one of the tools of representation - the canon. I have attempted to deconstruct patriarchy, paranoia, heterocentrism, nihilism and isolation. I wanted to consider how and why these authors were included in the canon and question that inclusion. I wanted to take the various markers of difference that frequently serve as barriers and/or prerequisites for canonical inclusion and invert them or make them deviate from the social norms that underpin them. In the same way that Faulkner uses polyphonic and mimetic representations of voice, which as Ross notes is the same way "that cubist paintings shatter representational images so that the painting can assert the image of itself" (308), I wanted to use the canon against itself to disrupt the representations that it offers to us as readers. For Barthes, the death of author is an act of liberation but the

author just won't die. In order for Barthes's death of the author to actually occur, we need to get our hands dirty.

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## VITA AUCTORIS

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